

A COMMENTARY
ON THE
FIRST EPISTLE OF ST. JOHN

D. THEOL. ERNST DRYANDER

TRANSLATED BY

W. O. E. OESTERLEY

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A COMMENTARY
ON
THE FIRST EPISTLE OF ST. JOHN.

Bible
A COMMENTARY
ON THE
FIRST EPISTLE OF ST. JOHN

IN THE FORM OF ADDRESSES.

BY
D. THEOL. ERNST DRYANDER,
*Superintendent-General of the Kurmark, Pastor of Holy Trinity
Church, Berlin.*

Translated and Edited

BY THE
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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

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TO the superficial reader the following pages will not unlikely prove disappointing; they are intended for the serious-minded, for the thoughtful, for those to whom religion—*i.e.*, the bond between them and their God—is the most important thing on earth, and who therefore read religious books with the *heart* as well as with the mind.

Who can tell the vast avenues of thought which have been traversed by an author? His words, indeed, reflect in some degree the light which illuminated his thoughts as they soared upward to the realms of light; and if we would do him justice, we must follow him, not only in his words—at best but off-gleams—but also in the *thoughts* which prompted them. In plain language, we must *think over* what we read.

HARDING
The author of the following addresses has not only granted the full license due to a translator, but has also permitted me to omit such passages as I might consider of small interest to English

readers. These have been but trifling; they consist in the omission of a few paragraphs at the end of Chapter IV., of the quotations from German hymns, and of some lines here and there which, for one reason or another, I deemed it expedient to omit.

The translation is in parts very free, for the author's brilliant oratory has often made it quite impossible to give an adequate equivalent in English.

A few notes have been added, as also the references, where quotations from the Bible occur.

I would earnestly commend the reader's attention to two points in the author's preface: firstly, that the character of the Epistle necessitates a certain amount of repetition in a commentary upon it; and secondly, that the Bible text should be repeatedly referred to while reading the commentary.

My sincere thanks are due to the Rev. G. H. Box, of Merchant Taylors' School, for having carefully revised the proof-sheets, and for having offered many valuable suggestions.

W. O. E. OESTERLEY.

LONDON,
December, 1898.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE.

THE following addresses on the First Epistle of St. John were prompted by my respected friend and predecessor in the pastoral office in the Kurmark, Dr. Kögel. They were given during the years 1893-96. The leisure required for their preparation for the press was obtained through the permission of temporary retirement from my office of Pastor in Berlin. During this time I also conceived the wish that the published addresses might in some degree compensate my congregation for my restricted intercourse with them.

Of the difficulties entailed in writing a running commentary on the First Epistle of St. John I have had abundant proof. Owing to its peculiar character, a certain amount of repetition was found to be unavoidable, for the same thoughts occur again and again in the Apostle's writing; and it has not always been possible for me to present the same truths from different points of view, as is the case in the original. I, however,

comfort myself with the thought that the addresses will not be read one immediately after the other.

It has been my aim, as far as possible, in addresses such as these, to write a commentary in the ordinary sense of the word, and not to overlook any difficulties which required explanation. It will, therefore, be advisable not only to read the text in each case two or three times over, but also to keep it open for reference while reading the address.

May God, Who has blessed these addresses to the congregation, grant a like blessing to them in their printed form.

THE AUTHOR.

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I.

A CHRISTMAS SERMON.

‘That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life ; (for the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us : and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.’—
1 JOHN i. 1-4.

PRAISED be the Lord, the God of Israel,
for He hath visited and redeemed His
people !

I do not propose to offer the Christmas *narrative* as a subject for our meditation at this festival, but none the less the Christmas *Gospel* in all its fulness. The Apostle’s words which we have just read do not indeed lead us directly to the crib in Bethlehem, into the presence of the newborn Child, but they point, as truly as any Christmas Gospel can, to the mystery which that crib enfolds.

Though in St. John we may not hear the angelic songs of praise re-echoing through heaven

and earth, yet the strains of joyful thanksgiving for God's unspeakable gift rise up clearly in these words just read. 'Most of all,' said Matthias Claudius, 'do I love reading the Gospel according to St. John. There is something so altogether wonderful in it: twilight and darkness, through which the sudden, dazzling lightning plays. Sometimes a ring of sadness vibrates amidst its lofty ideals, and a great presentiment seizes the heart . . . one yearns for more.'¹ Who among all the Apostles understood as he did to express the unspeakable in words, to reveal the eternal secret of the Incarnation in the most childlike, simple manner, and with a holy dignity to lift up the soul as upon eagles' wings, to the heights of eternity? This he does here, too, when he gathers up all the riches of the Christmas-message in one word, which forms the kernel of the above verses: 'The life was manifested.' Enumerate whatsoever gifts you will which this festival showers upon us, they are contained in these words.

We are celebrating a feast of holy joy, which no mourning must o'ershadow, for 'the Life is manifested.' We offer one another gifts of love as tokens of the eternal love which gives the

¹ Matthias Claudius was born near Lübeck, and lived during the latter half of last century. He was a lawyer by profession, and a poet by nature. Though no theologian, he exercised a great influence on the religious life of his country by his practical example and sympathetic Christian feeling; this influence was extended by his writings, in which wit and irony are strangely mingled with deep devotion and earnestness. He was a vigorous opponent of the prevailing rationalism of his time.—*Trans.*

greatest gift—the *Life* which was manifested. A new relation between heaven and earth does the hymn of the heavenly hosts ring in, for the gates of heaven are flung apart: the *Life* is manifested!

O Christian men and women, whatsoever any one of you may pray for, be it for self-consecration in keeping the feast, be it for comfort in sorrow, be it for peace and strength in loneliness, it will be found in these words which the Apostle spoke, and which, by the grace and help of God, we will now meditate upon. Just as the Apostle does, so let us ('that they also may have fellowship with us') declare unto all men that joyful message:

'THE LIFE WAS MANIFESTED.'

The Life was manifested! What does this mean? What life is meant? This is the first point of our inquiry.

Picture to yourself a father and mother at the bedside of their dying child. With fervent supplication do they wrestle in prayer for their little one. It is restored to them, but with mind hopelessly deranged. Is *that* life? Or think of one condemned to death. A respite is granted before the terrible sentence is carried out; but every moment of existence is darkened with the awful thought of what the end will be. Is *that* life? Or there is, maybe, another, dogged, enslaved, tortured by some vile passion. He is yet

powerless to free himself. Deep sorrow fills his heart as he perceives himself fettered by the chains of sensuality and sin, and, like a St. Augustine in his confessions, he cries, 'Such was my life, and, O God, *what* a life was that!' Or, once more, picture to yourself some working-man groaning under the weight of his daily burden, no light to chase the gloom from his care-surrounded home; ever and ever is renewed the struggle with poverty, sickness and the world. Can *this* be called life? Or, finally, think of the nobler things, yea, the noblest which the world has to offer; let your life be surrounded with all that is sweet to the eye and pleasant to the ear; let art adorn, let knowledge edify, let love delight, let work content—in spite of all, the cankerworm, secreted, rots and ever rots.

Death and destruction, tumult and unrest, dissension and fear, are man's from birth. Where, then, is that life which is really *living*—the life that has no spot, no blemish, that carries in its train no *death*? Where is that life on earth, which of its fulness doth lavish life, at which no death and no destruction gnaw? Hearken with burning heart to the answer which St. John gives, when he says: 'The Life was manifested.' The Life is manifested, hath appeared; from deep and secret mystery it has come to light. The world did not bring it forth; it could not. How should life, immortal life, come forth from a world of death and sin? Alas! the world did not even

recognise this Life when it did appear; when 'He came unto His own, His own received Him not.'¹ And yet this Life was no imagined thing, no fancy, no uncertain rumour, no empty thought from human mind, born of expectation's ardent wish—this Life was truth, reality, seen by the disciples with their own eyes, heard with their own ears, yea, touched with their own hands; 'that which we have *seen* and *heard* declare we unto you.' How did the Apostle experience the life of which he speaks? He did not stand with the shepherds by that cradle of the world's Saviour; not from angels' lips did he receive the revelation. When the Gospel message was announced to him, there was nothing wonderful, nothing supernatural, in the telling. It was on Jordan's banks, as a follower of the Baptist, that he heard the words of his master: 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!'² It was this saying which led him into fellowship with the Redeemer, 'whose shoe-latchet' the Baptist 'was not worthy to unloose.' Henceforth he followed in the steps of Jesus Christ. He leaned upon His breast, heard His words, witnessed His works, gazed into the depths of His heart. And whatsoever he saw in Him, whatsoever he heard and learned from Him, was 'the Word of *life*.' Every word that Jesus spoke was *life*. 'Thou hast the words of eternal life'³—so did St. Peter express the conviction of all the disciples. But not only has

¹ St. John i. 11.

² St. John i. 29.

³ St. John vi. 68.

His word life in itself, no, but He Himself is the Life. Never were word and person so united in one as with Him. He Himself was the Word of life. St. John had experienced how mightily this life had welled up in him—in following Jesus Christ he became *living*. A Christian of our days has witnessed: ‘My life began when I learned to love Thee;’ long ago St. John experienced this. Evil, discord, sin—all in fact that spoils and desolates life and leads deathwards, decreases in him, as he learns to live more closely in the fellowship of Jesus; yes, it generates in him that life which is not of this world, but which flows out from eternity—that full, clear experience of life which is peace and joy and righteousness in the Holy Spirit. The more deeply he enters into the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ, the more fully does he realize that He is life, holy and immaculate in the midst of a sinful world; peaceful and calm in a world of faction and sorrow; pure, disinterested and single-hearted in a world of deceit; yes, eternal, immortal in a world of corruption; death cannot hold Him, the grave must give Him up.

And when the Apostle asks himself whence this Life, which he has touched with his hands, which he has been permitted to look upon in its full reality of human existence, he answers without any doubt that it cannot originate in the world, it *can* only come from God. It is that Life ‘which was from the beginning,’ which ‘was with the Father,’ and was itself divine, and which, from the incon-

ceivable depths of eternity, appeared, in the fullness of time, in human form, and dwelt among us. Thus did St. John proclaim the sublimest Christmas message that ever sprung from human lips, and in the very forefront of his Gospel the words ring out, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.'¹ Grace and Truth, the Life of the invisible God Himself, appeared, and entered into the world in Christ Jesus. And that great moment in which He who was from the beginning took the form of transient humanity, in which heaven and earth, time and eternity, were joined in holy wedlock, and the Life itself put on the garb of dying, fading mortals—that great moment this festival commemorates. The Word was made flesh, the Life was manifested!

'He whom earth's orb could not contain,
In Mary's holy arms hath lain ;
He who alone all things upholds
A human mother's arm enfolds.'

But, beloved Christians, the Life was manifested that 'we might have life.' St. John does not write about that manifested Life only in order that he may rejoice in its light, and leave the death-girt world to its fate, but 'that which we have seen and heard declare we unto *you*, that *ye* also may have fellowship with us.' What he has received he would share with us, that he may lead us thither, where the Lord has brought him, that we

¹ St. John i. 1-14.

may *become living* in the power of the manifested life. In few words he sums up what he has received from his Lord. 'Our fellowship,' he says, 'is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ.' Ay, there it is—*fellowship with God!* That, in a word, was the wondrous new life which flowed into him; that was the power which overcame all that was bad in him; that was the Light which dimmed all other lights that hitherto had filled his eyes. This fellowship with God he received in his fellowship with Christ, and it is just this fellowship that he would impart to his hearers, even to us all.

Christians, the highest which can appertain to man, that which is most blessed, too, is that he may have fellowship with God. He who lacks this lacks life—lacks all that makes life precious, beautiful, joyous, and bright. And should he stand surrounded with earth's choicest treasures, they are as naught if he knows not of this fellowship with God. He who has this fellowship walks as the living among the dead; it matters not though the restless waves of care surge around his very soul. Fellowship with God! Whatsoever is painful, destructive, death-bringing in our life, in this sweet fellowship with God it is overcome, dispersed.

Look into thine own experience. Ever again dost thou find thyself held by the curse of the fear of death. Where is the man who is altogether free from such? He who has fellowship with the living God knows, with the Apostle,

that naught, neither death nor life, neither height nor depth, can separate from the love of God. Of thyself thou hast no peace; at every turn deep sorrow, insidious worry, dogs thy steps. What thou lackest, and what alone can calm thy tumultuous being, is the harmony, the fellowship, of God. The guilt of past years weighs heavily. Oh that this stain were blotted out, that act undone! One thing alone can efface thy sin: it is the Father's love, the fellowship with God. Thou clutchest at the chains; thy passions grant thee no release, from thyself thou canst not free thyself. The freedom of God's children cannot be had but in fellowship with Him. In thy despair the very ground seems slipping from thy view; around thou seest naught but surging, speeding mists, no path on earth, no star in heaven above. Then learn to trust, and, trusting, seize the hand stretched forth to save, and thou shalt have fellowship with God, e'en though thou see Him not.

Thy cares are too many to bear? What! shall the Father forsake the child with whom He stands in fellowship? Nay, come with all thy wants and with all thy prayers; come to the sanctuary which thy Saviour has opened for thee, and whatsoever thou shalt ask in the name of Christ thou shalt receive—yes, through Jesus Christ; for in Him and through Him do we have fellowship with the Father. That is the gift which is bestowed upon us in Him, that we through Him may become

children of grace, united in fellowship with the Father. For this, life's fulness descended into a world of death.

Receive Him, then, as once St. John did; follow Him in His teaching, and ye shall have in Him the life of fellowship with God. Suffer His word to influence you, as once it influenced the Apostle. It may be painful; it will shame indifference, will startle the slumbering conscience, will make us dissatisfied with ourselves; it will cause fear and trembling for the soul's welfare. Nevertheless, it leads *not* to death, but to life. And through His word be guided to the Lord Himself. He has what ye seek; He possesses what ye desire; He can give what is life to us—His peace and His salvation.

The closer you draw to Him, the more brightly will shine forth from His person upon you the glory of the Father. What though ye cannot, like His disciples, touch Him with your hands and see Him with your eyes: ye can at least receive the testimony which He has given through His Apostles, that 'we may have fellowship with Him.' On their word, as on a heavenly bridge, He hastens towards us, giving us His Spirit, whereby we cry, 'Abba, beloved Father!' and every hour of such experience reveals more clearly the meaning of the Apostle's words, 'And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full'—*i.e.*, may be perfected.

The joy which at the Christmas festival

gladdens our poor world—alas! how passing, how transient, it is, how tinged with bitterness, envy, vanity and selfishness, how few experience it!—that joy of Divine fellowship abides, undimmed, perfect, when the Christmas candles have long since burned down, and the Christmas gifts have long since lost their use. Then grapple to your hearts, dear friends, the overwhelming certainty of this truth: ‘We have fellowship with the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Realize that we receive from His fulness grace for grace, and a torrent of light and joy will be poured forth upon your lives which no earthly sorrow shall ever wholly quench. Think how this fellowship with God annihilates all the sorrow that our sins are ever calling forth!

You all, who belong to one family, who are brought together, led by God, that one may be the blessing of another, may make life more lovely, more bright; you who in love and kindness give one another gifts—let all discord and bitterness, all that causes coldness and estrangement, be buried; let your gentleness and unselfishness and love be sanctified in the patient, forgiving, long-suffering fellowship of Christ. How perfect shall your joy be then!

Ye citizens of one Fatherland, one State, called, each one of you, to work for the common weal, the common happiness, let hate and envy cease. Away with all ambitious dreams of self-aggrandizement; let all strife be buried in the fellowship of

Christ. Ah, then, what fulness of peace, contentment, and happiness will flow in upon these anxious times!

True enough, *all* sorrow will not cease—we need it far too much; we could not do without it. Ever and anon must God send His storms, else would men grow too proud, and earth would be too sweet. But what brightness of vision pierces through the care-clouds, when sorrow-stricken man can say, ‘And have I Thee then heaven and earth are nought to me’; or, with St. Paul, ‘Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.’¹

Yes, sickness and death will rage among us still, whether we believe or not. For not even at Christmastide does the grave-digger keep holiday. Pain and sickness cease not though the festival be here. But, since the Life hath been manifested, death reigns no longer unopposed. At the graveside of a friend aged Claudius thus soothed another’s anguish: ‘Weep not, for Christ was *born* to-day.’

Christmas joy sheds its light, too, into the dimness of the sick chamber, and just when sickness calls forth anxious thoughts, and outward things are dark, then shall it be seen that *this* joy floats far above all earthly cares. It is the joy of eternity, and therefore the fulness of joy.

And when *our* time shall come—ah, does not Holy Church in the Gospel for the day after

¹ Rom. viii. 37.

Christmas Day bid us read of St. Stephen, the proto-martyr : ' Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God ' ?¹ And aged Simeon has spoken : ' Lord now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation. ' ² He who at death can still take heart, he who though dying is sure of the life which death cannot rob him of, he who in the twilight of life beholds the eternal Light—his is, in truth, eternal joy in all its fullness.

Whether we be rich, and our Christmas festivity displays itself in luxurious plenty, or whether the feast is humbly kept in some poor lonesome garret ; whether in old age, awaiting the future in devout patience, like Simeon and Anna, or whether with life before us, buoyed up with many hopes—be our condition what it may, let us ask our God that the joy of Christmas may be realized in this, that we may have ' fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, ' and that our ' joy may be full. '

¹ Acts vii. 56.

² St. Luke ii. 29, 30

II.

GOD IS LIGHT.

‘This then is the message which we have heard of Him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth : but if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.’—1 JOHN i. 5-10.

LET us now direct attention to an insidious danger which menaces our personal religion. We have been born and bred up in an atmosphere of Christianity. We live amid Christian surroundings, and our minds are, more or less, impregnated with Christian ideas. We attend Divine service ; we, no doubt, offer up our private prayers at home, and, to a certain extent, we respond to the demands of Christian morality. That, generally speaking, is the sum and substance of our personal religion. But we do not realize that, after all, this modicum of Christian possession does not constitute more than the *form*

of Christianity, not its *essence*; only the appearance, not the reality; only the husk, not the kernel.

And herein lies that terrible weakness of the Christian position, which to those who look beneath the surface, is apparent on every side and at every turn. Inward truth is wanting, and therefore also the capacity for expressing it in action. But the lack of this discriminating quality drags in its train a still more dangerous want, that of *individual* sincerity, *i.e.*, genuineness. Does the grave moral reproach herein implied come home to any of us? Do we in our personal religion lack that inner genuineness and integrity without which it is impossible for the world to look even with respect upon Christianity and its professors? Is our piety and inner life wanting in that sincerity without which it is impossible to see God?

Whatsoever may be the answers to these questions, the words of St. John written above point to this danger, which has always threatened Christians. Moreover, they urge us to a careful consideration of the question whether this very danger is not present with us now.

Clearly, the central point of our passage (i. 5-10) is the announcement that 'God is Light.' 'What we have seen and heard' (namely, of the manifested Word of Life), 'that declare we unto you.' Thus had the Apostle written in the opening words of his Epistle immediately before; and now he tells us what has been heard: 'This is the message which we have heard of Him, that God

is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all.' That is the short, simple message, and in it is contained all that is needful for us in examining the danger just referred to.

GOD IS LIGHT.

These words will disclose this danger, and will lead us to test our genuineness in the sight of God. They will also urge us to 'walk in the light,' and will show us the blessing which descends upon such as are guided by that Light from above.

I.

'I have manifested Thy name,' says the Saviour in the high-priestly prayer (St. John xvii.). He manifested Him, too, as the God who 'is Light, and in whom is no darkness at all.'

The thought that 'God is Light' was not in itself new or hitherto unheard of. When Ezekiel saw the glory of God (Ezek. i.), it appeared to him as 'a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire.' The Psalmist too, recognising God's power and glory in Nature, cries: 'Who coverest Thyself with light, as with a garment' (Ps. civ. 2). That God in His essential being is Light, and therefore free from the darkness which overshadows us, that He is without the cloud of error's gloom, untouched by the blemishes of sin, and that He in His very self is Truth, Holiness, and Salvation,

this, at least, the prophets of the Old Covenant realized.

Had our Saviour left us nothing but the revelation of this attribute of the eternal God, He would indeed have bequeathed a stupendous thought to philosophic speculation, but He would not have given to the sinful world a Gospel, He would not have brought redemption to earth-bound mortals. In the mouth of St. John the thought that 'God is Light' receives a new meaning; (his purpose is not to tell us what God is in Himself, but to show us what God is *for us*, and what we are to be through Him and for Him. If I knew only that the eternal God is Light, I should but realize more painfully my own darkness. But God is Light, *in order that He may give light*; and upon us, who sat in darkness, has He poured out the brightness of His light; into our souls has streamed the brilliancy of His truth; into our sinful hearts has shone the beauty of His holiness; salvation and peace have been proclaimed to us, sitting in the valley of the shadow of death, and we have been quickened, transfigured.)

(Thus *we* are become light, in which is no more darkness, and thus God's righteousness and truth and peace are to become *ours*. That is the message which St. John brings; he had heard it from our Lord, as he testifies;) not that Christ had spoken these very words to him—at least we know of no such passage in the Gospels—but He had done much more; not with words alone, but in His

whole life He had shown forth that God is Light. Whosoever saw Him saw that the Father, Who was in Him, was light and truth, and holiness and salvation. Behold Him! He speaks of heavenly things as of His own, faultless in His words; *indeed*, He is truth. He stands in the midst of the sinful world untouched by sin; in combat with the world, but filled with inexpressible pity, and manifesting Divine patience. *Indeed*, He is love; in Him the holiness of God assumes human form. And as He walks, calm and meditative, through all the misery and unrest, through all the enmity and persecution of the world, pure and undefiled, do we not realize that in Him the salvation of God becomes visible to a lost world? (The eloquence of this silent message mastered the Apostles. It masters us to-day too; its full significance is only apparent when from the domain of thought it is transferred to the sphere of practical life. If God is light, if He has become light *for us* in the truth and holiness and peace of Jesus Christ, then darkness cannot any more o'ershadow us.) Never in Holy Writ, least of all in St. John's writings, do we come across that antagonism between doctrine and practice which is so glaringly prevalent among us. 'If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth.'

This is the test which is demanded of us, and, according to the Apostle, it is one which resolves itself into a test of our *genuineness*. (To stand in

the light, and yet to remain in darkness, to live in the fellowship of God, who is Light, and yet to be walking in darkness—this is in itself a contradiction. But it is more than a contradiction; it is self-deception, a sham, a lie, if we say that ‘we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness.’ Fellow-Christians, let us pray for the Spirit of genuineness and truth, that we may test ourselves, and see whether this self-deception, this lie, reigns in our hearts.

‘If we say that we have fellowship with God.’ In a certain sense we all say that, otherwise we should not be Christians. We prove this fellowship by our prayers—alas! how often cold and perfunctory. We show it by our presence at Divine service—so often wanting in fervour and heartiness. We renew it in the Blessed Sacrament—only too rarely partaken of. In our sorrows we comfort ourselves with the thought of this fellowship; we look for strength therefrom at the hour of death. But is this really the fellowship with God of which St. John speaks? Ah no; the Apostle has a very different standard for measuring its worth. He knows of only one, which is infallible, viz., *walking in the light*. Yes, walking in the light, as He is in the light. That ‘walking’ includes all of life, from infancy to old age. If thou wouldest walk in the light, thy ways must be light, straight, pure, holy. Consider carefully: have there been no wanderings in thy life of which thou art ashamed—alas! leaves in

life's book, seasons of backsliding, which thou hast carefully hidden from every eye? In the light of His countenance those ways, too, must be light and clear along which God Himself walks with thee. And how often, when His ways seemed long and inscrutable, and when He demanded self-sacrifice, thou hast been faithless, fearful, plunged in despair. And while thou didst affirm that thou hadst fellowship with Him, thou wast walking in darkness. The eyes of him who walks in the light must be lightened, that he may recognise God's commands. Wert thou walking in the light, thou wouldest know in each emergency whither the Divine will pointed; thou wouldest see all too plainly that thy unloving, unresponsive heart could not abide in that holy light streaming forth from the countenance of God; the more earnest thy desire to do His will, the more sensitive would thy conscience become. Ah, how often has thy conscience pricked thee—how often has that still small voice warned at the parting of the ways, and thou didst turn aside, in spite of it! Thou *wouldest* not listen; thou didst find a refuge in self-deceiving, plausible excuse; thou didst justify thyself, as some clever unscrupulous lawyer justifies a criminal; alas! what didst thou do? Thou didst plunge into the darkness. Darest thou still say thou hast fellowship with the God of Light?

(And once again: this 'walking in the light' cannot be limited to a few hours or weeks—

cannot be followed just at certain critical periods of our life, cannot be temporarily indulged in at the bidding of some passing emotion; it suffers no individual caprice of this kind. To 'walk in the light' does not mean merely to come into contact with the light; men who are altogether strangers to religion naturally possess *some* of this light—the fact that they have a conscience proves this. And so, too, to 'walk in darkness' does not mean merely to come in contact with darkness; who of us is not to some extent in darkness as long as we are what we are, and not yet what 'we shall be'? No, when the Apostle speaks of light and darkness he refers to that *element* in which we move, in which we are content to remain, which gives the *tone* to our motives, whence we gather strength for our life's journey.)

(To 'walk in the light' means, therefore, to be guided by God, Who is Light, to place oneself under the influence of that Light, by means of which the truth, the holiness, and salvation of God are apprehended, are appropriated, by the act of our free will. There can only be a question of 'walking in the light,' of 'fellowship with God,' when He illuminates the *heart*, and from thence sanctifies every action of our life.) But the man who fancies that he walks in the light, and yet knowingly withdraws himself, first for this reason and then for that, from its hallowing influence, whether it be that he panders to his vanity, or to an inordinate love of riches, or whether it be that

he gives rein to hatred, or indulges some lustful passion, such an one is not only a standing contradiction in himself, but he is also *acting a lie*. 'We lie,' as St. John puts it; we speak of a fellowship with God which does not exist, and which therefore, through the evil motives and acts of our life, is rightly branded as a 'lie.' And yet it is no ordinary lie, it is worse, more terrible. For we lie in that which ought to be most pure, most holy—our relations with God; we turn this into a lie and a sham. Few, probably, are wholly free from such defect. For it is just this want of reality in the sight of God which causes that weakness and half-heartedness in our religion which we feel is so lamentably characteristic of it. It can bear no strain because it has no essential vigour; it cannot win others because it is powerless to dominate *us*; it cannot extort respect from the world, because the world sees that it has not conquered our own wills, our own passions, our own sins. It is, shall we say, a certain frame of thought—a slowly-acquired mode of assent, habit, and intuition; but it is not, as it ought to be, fellowship of life with the living God, and for that reason, power, life, and light. It lacks light from above, and therefore it has but little influence over the world without.

'We lie, and do not the truth,' writes the Apostle, showing clearly what is required, and where we fall short: *doing the truth, i.e., the truth which we know to be from God.* We know the

truth, but we do it not, because it is too exacting. We do not care to forsake the truth because we cannot bring ourselves to deny it, but we do not champion the truth because we are too feeble. Yet the value of our religion does not consist in our knowledge of its truth, but in our practice of its truth, and in the earnestness with which we walk in its light. It is not the knowledge of Him that brings us into personal fellowship with God, but the upright and honest resolution to 'do the truth.' It may often be that the simple Christian who knows nothing more than his Catechism, stands on a far higher pinnacle than the learned theologian, who thinks to understand Divine mysteries. Often, too, a childlike simplicity may count for more than the most brilliant worldly wisdom, however deeply versed in secular knowledge, for the word of the Lord holds good: 'He that doeth truth cometh to the light' (St. John iii. 21). Thus alone can we free ourselves from the darkness. There is no other way.

II.

Let us, then, 'walk in the light, as He is in the light.' What does this mean? How can it be done? First let us remember that the Apostle makes no impossible demand when he speaks of our 'walking in the light.' He does not require of us that we should be perfect in the sense in which God is perfect; but he does demand that

we should in all sincerity place ourselves under the influence of the light which is in God, and which streams forth from Him. He does not ask perfected holiness, as God is holy; but he demands concentrated zeal. No hindrance must be offered to the light of truth and holiness with which our life is to be penetrated. When he bids us 'walk in the light,' he means, as already said, that our whole lives should be influenced thereby, our thoughts and acts, the outer as well as the inner man; our life is to be illuminated through that hallowing and transfiguring light which comes from God, and which illuminates us in Christ Jesus.

God cannot be content with half measures. The work of redemption is to Him one of all-embracing importance, and as certain as it is that He is light, and that the light was seen in Jesus Christ, so certain is it that He wishes us to become light. If we are true Christians, it is our bounden duty to undergo daily the 'proving of ourselves' in the presence of God. Am I a child of light? Am I walking in the light? Not only my thoughts and words, but also the wayward phantasies of the imagination, and that unfathomable labyrinth of *motives*, are they subject to the discipline of His Holy Spirit? Is it my absolute will not to permit the reign of darkness, even when the light causes pain, when fear of the light impels me to seek the darkness, when my natural desires yearn for the all-concealing night?

The light is there; it is there to *lighten*, and daily does it shine upon thy soul. Art thou ready to receive the light, to open out thy heart and welcome its rays? With this holy desire does the 'walking in the light' begin.

And now the Apostle immediately proceeds to offer a definite test which is to determine whether we are 'walking in the light.' 'But if we walk in the light we have fellowship one with another.' Wheresoever light is, there will be generated holy love. Walking in the light is of necessity walking in love. Every estrangement from God causes division among men, through selfishness and egotism. When love grows cold, then light recedes, and darkness envelops all. When the heart is filled with an earnest desire for sanctification, there the light is seen in the power of ardent, self-sacrificing love.

And every renewed fellowship with God makes our love gentler, more responsive, more self-denying; it brings renewed affection to husband and wife, renewed forbearance and patience in the family circle, a link of kindness between those separated by strife and faction, new warmth into this cold and loveless world.

Fellow-Christians, by your sincerity, by your disinterested love, answer the question, Are you 'walking in the light'? And yet another thought is in the Apostle's mind. To be sure, when the Divine truth has become a power in us, revealing a holier object in life, cleansing anew the con-

science, we partake of a new life in the glow of the light that has arisen in our hearts. But, the brighter that light which shines upon us, the more does our own sinfulness become manifest. Blemishes hitherto hidden come to light, little sins become great; what we had not thought wrong, we now recognise as sinful.

It is just this terror of sin, this fear of unwelcome discoveries, this aversion to 'cutting off'¹ what has become part of our nature, that drives us back again into the twilight, where we were so content with ourselves, and where we enjoyed the comfort of self-deception. For only when we are thoroughly in earnest in that fight with self do we realize what an awful enemy we have to deal with. 'Walking in the light' is in reality one unending battle with sin, which, as it were, clings to us and impedes our forward march. The man who would deny this and say 'We have no sin,' has no truth in him.

No, it is not as though we were occupied in washing away a few spots and blemishes here and there; 'the old man'² dwells in us still, and proudly raises his head as ruler. His chains, one by one, must be snapped and cast off, lest again and again he assert his ancient power, when we grow weary and cease to watch. His authority is far from curtailed yet; each of us has his pet sin, each his vulnerable point, which yields in temptation's hour. Again and again we sink

¹ St. Matt. v. 30.

² Eph. iv. 22.

down, overcome with fatigue, and with deep shame have to confess that the power of the unregenerate man has overcome us. Fellow-Christians, by the zeal of your warfare against self, by the sanctification of which you partake, answer the question, Are you walking in the light?

But the Apostle has the sweetest comfort for those who realize the intense seriousness of these thoughts, and are bowed down with a sense of their own sinfulness. When we remember how incomplete our sanctification still is, what power sin still has over us, we are nevertheless to take comfort, we are not to despair. He who is resolved to walk in the light, and to eschew the darkness, may take these words to heart: 'The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.' The Apostle is not here referring to the blessing which Christ's death brings, and by means of which sin is forgiven and reconciliation accomplished. He is speaking rather of the purifying power which flows out from our Lord's self-sacrifice, even unto death, upon all those who desire to be cleansed, and by means of which God fulfils in them the work He has begun.

The follower of the crucified Saviour can no longer serve sin; as often as he raises his eyes to the Cross, sin's seductive allurements are *shamed*. His holy love dwelling in the soul cleanses it from selfishness and all evil, and the realization of this indwelling power is the proof

as well as the blessed fruit of 'walking in the light.'

Truly it is a glorious ideal to which St. John points Christians; on such a height he can feel salvation near, can be happy in forgiveness, can glory in the cleansing power of Christ's blood; for he is 'walking in the light.' But because it is of such vital importance to emphasize the conditions of this advance, the Apostle refers once more to them, as follows: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' He who would spare himself the inevitable agony of self-condemnation, and denies his sinfulness, or regards it as a light thing easily overcome, such an one has not yet received into his soul the light of Divine truth and holiness; he makes God a liar, as the Apostle expresses it in terrible language. For, whereas God condemns him as a sinner, he seeks to justify himself with his assumed righteousness. To him the word of truth is nothing; he despises the message of grace.

However good a man may be, there is but one way by which he can receive the grace of God, viz., by confessing his sins with a humble and contrite heart; and by one way only can he attain to a conviction of sinfulness—by acknowledging that sin only becomes the more sinful and horrible the more unreservedly he commits himself to the light. To such these words are of most joyful significance: 'He is faithful and just

to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

Herein we may see God's faithfulness, for He keeps that promise which He made to His Son Jesus Christ, that, in spite of our unfaithfulness, He will not cast us off, and that His mercy towards us shall endure for ever. And He shows forth His righteousness by the fact that He regards the repentant sinner so differently from the self-righteous, and that, through Jesus Christ, He cleanses the sincere penitent from all unrighteousness.

By the power of humility, all unworthy impulses, all falsenesses, are overcome. We are not yet perfect, and yet we are in the light, and experience the purifying power of God. In this blessed co-operation of contrition and grace is proved the reality of our 'walking in the light,' and of our personal religion.

Once more let me repeat it. The Apostle makes no impossible or unheard-of demand upon us. God is light; we are to become light in His light; that is the simple burden of His message, easily understood by all; and he has shown us how this thought is to be wrought out in our lives.

There may be many questions, many doubts, and many objections raised with regard to this apostolic message; for we are not unaware of the difficulties which serious-minded men have to contend with in the attainment of a living faith;

but whatsoever reproach may be cast upon our want of faith, its weakness or its lifelessness, let us in God's name wrestle in vehement, burning prayer that the reproach be not this: Thou wast lacking in genuineness, therefore thou couldst not come to God Who is Light; thou didst love the darkness better than the light.

III.

OBEDIENCE.

‘My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. And hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth His word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in Him. He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked.’—1 JOHN ii. 1-6.

THE train of thought running through these verses is closely connected with that of the preceding section. The Apostle exhorted us there to test our genuineness by his declaration that ‘God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all,’ and we saw that these words are in reality an exhortation to ‘walk in the light.’ A similar thought, carrying on the former one, and yet in a sense different from it, will be the subject of our present meditation.

‘These things write I unto you, that ye sin not’; every word that follows is intended to impress upon us more and more deeply the fact that [the goal of the Christian’s life, the essence of

the Christian's religion, is to be *Obedience to the Father*. In this demand of obedience is involved everything that is required. Not that St. John would lay upon us a heavy yoke. Nay, as a father counsels his children, and tells them of that which is best for their happiness, for their welfare, so does the Apostle write to those whom he tenderly loves, who are his own dear children in the faith of Christ. He gives them of his best, that which will keep them from the evil one. He shows them the loftiest and purest love when he depicts as horrible, unbearable, whatsoever is bad. So that his earnest exhortation is summed up in the words, 'My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.' He urges upon them, and upon all who read his words, Obedience to the Father.

And in connection with this obedience he points out :

(1) How serious it is—the one sign of our fellowship with God.

(2) How easy it is—for we have an Advocate with the Father.

(3) How blessed it is—for in it is the love of God perfected.

I.

The Apostle first of all bids us note how serious is this demand of obedience to the Father. To him it is the one and infallible sign of our fellowship with God. Nothing can take the place

of this one indispensable condition; no confession, however faithful; no 'Lord, Lord,' however earnest; no church-going, however regular; no calling, however high. Nothing can take the place of obedience to the Father. Not to commit sin is, in other words, to obey the commandments of God. If there has been one man who in the lofty flight of his thoughts has revealed to us a new world in the knowledge of the Gospel, who has been the means of opening our eyes to a holier, deeper conception of God, that man is St. John. But this same St. John, this mystic among the Apostles, who with his profound speculative genius has sought to sound the depths of eternity, is so intensely practical, that when he wishes to show a way towards attaining to a knowledge of God, he says, in simple words, 'that ye sin not.' The fulfilling of this precept brings with it the knowledge of God, which must be the ultimate aim of all Christians.

For God is not comprehended with the understanding, as though the merely clever man could attain to the deepest knowledge of God. God is only comprehended by the impulse towards Him of the entire inner man. As one of the fathers of the Church has said, 'He is only known in proportion as He is loved; He is only apprehended of him who becomes like Him.' So that there is only one infallible sign of His fellowship: 'whereby we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.'

To keep God's commandments. The demand seems simple enough. To that rich young man it appeared such an easy thing that he exclaimed, almost, as it seems, with contempt: 'All these have I kept from my youth up. What lack I yet?'¹ Alas! how few there are who could *think* of saying this; nay, of those commandments, is there even *one* of which we can say, 'This have I kept from my youth up'? Which, rather, among them have we not transgressed, in spite of our acknowledging God to be the God of holiness and truth?

But the Apostle carries the thought further; he sharpens and intensifies the whole matter by transforming the 'thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not' into the terms of actual life and reality, and makes the keeping of the commandments synonymous with 'He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked.' 'Even as *He* walked'; he alludes, of course, to Jesus Christ our Lord. He *lived* what He taught; He is the living fulfilment of God's commandments. And He is yet more. We could not know God were not the countenance of God revealed to us in Him. In Him bursts forth for us a knowledge of the Father. Whosoever sees Him sees the Father. His commandments are the Father's commandments. Whosoever follows after Him abideth in the commandments of the Father. Then, gauge no more thy piety by the keeping of this or that commandment, but look into the

¹ St. Matt. xix. 20.

whole life's picture of thy Saviour; behold His thoughts, His words, His acts; let these be the standard whereby to test.

'My meat'—*i.e.*, my indispensable food, my innermost refreshment—says our Lord, 'is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work.'¹ In this holy relationship to God, in this uninterrupted dependence on the Father, in this indefectible obedience to His will, does the earthly life of our Lord flow on, on to the last breath. Put it to thyself: Wherein dost thou see the indispensable food for thy soul, the refreshment and joy, the nourishment of the inner man? Who among us can answer with the Psalmist, 'The judgments of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether; more to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb'²

Furthermore, our Lord has said that He came 'not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.'³ This, again, is not merely a *saying* of our Lord's, but the interpretation of His life, the watchword of His daily work. And now seek out the deeds, the proofs of love in thy life, those which in very truth witness to thy self-sacrifice, which have reflected the holy, humble, ministering love of thy Saviour. Alas! so sparsely sowed are they, so scarcely visible, that some of us perhaps cannot find *one*. Then ask thyself what value in thine

¹ St. John iv. 34. ² Ps. xix. 9, 10, P.B.V. ³ St. Matt. xx. 28.

eyes has the word, the example of Jesus, with what power (if any) this example influences thy soul, rules thy conduct. Perchance thou wilt be shocked to realize how unmoved, how cold, thy unresponsive heart has been in the light of His example. What? Thou wilt yet maintain that thou knowest Him? *He* is to be thy comfort in life, thy hope in death? Dost thou fancy that, after all, thou art not such a bad Christian, because thou art not ashamed of thy faith, because on Sunday thou art present in church, and offerest up daily prayers? Knowest thou not how thy shortcomings and sins dishonour thy Lord? Usually the master is regarded as responsible for the deeds of his servant! But if thy Master should be estimated in the light of thy cold, self-seeking life, must He not reply: 'I never knew you; depart from Me, ye that work iniquity.'¹

Ah, let us brush away all self-deception, whereby we seek to cover over the truth. The confession we frame with our mouth, the pious feelings in which we bask, the form of Christianity in which we move, these are not the real signs of our heart's attitude to God, nor the measure of our knowledge of Him; only the earnestness, the devotion, with which we carry out His will evidence our sincerity convincingly; 'He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him;' so writes the Apostle.

¹ St. Matt. vii. 23.

Ah, how dreadful does that word 'liar' sound! He who lies cuts himself adrift from truth; he who lies lacks the fundamental condition of all moral living, has lost that inner sincerity which calls into being fellowship with God. Yet we dare not desist from using the word, if it really points to the black spot in our character. And it need not be a consummated lie. Picture thyself face to face with a demand from thy God; thy conscience has spoken, and acknowledged the justice of the Divine behest. (Thou knewest that there could be no real fellowship with God without a painful sacrifice; but it cut too deeply into thy habits, it clashed too sorely with thy inclinations, thou wert too closely riveted to thy passion.) Then thou didst lie to thyself; as though thou couldst shuffle off the guilt and retain the sin!

What didst thou do? The dark spots which were in thy heart hast thou cast on Him, whom thou feignedst to know; thou didst persuade thyself that the sin was gone, that there existed mercy and grace, but without holiness; thou didst strangle within thee the conception of truth. Terrible as it may sound, in the sight of God only two things are possible: to know Him, or to be a stranger to Him; to stand before Him in truth, or in falsehood. Stupendous indeed is the demand of obedience to God's commands. Ah, St. John knew well why he began with the words, 'My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.'

II.

But the self-same Apostle knew also that it is impossible to abide without sin. Only a few lines before, he, with the experience of ninety years of life, had said, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' And in the same breath he continues: 'These things write I unto you, that ye sin not; and if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.' Stern as the demand for obedience is, it is none the less made easy through Him who has the power to make it so, viz., Christ.

But let it not be imagined that the Apostle hereby opens a door for religious ease to the fancied security of a spurious piety, inviting the sinner to religious lethargy, to a lulling of conscience. Can one offer a deeper insult to Him Who for redemption from sin underwent the bitter sufferings of death, than to make Him a servant of sin? No; and be it remembered that the Apostle *also* writes these words: 'These things write I unto you, that ye sin *not*.' Only when with fear and trembling a man has strenuously wrestled in obedience to the faith, has diligently sought to observe God's commands, and truly tried to walk in the footsteps of Christ, only then may the sweet comfort of the 'Advocate' cheer him.

But further, the Apostle continues, 'And He

is the propitiation for our sins;’ the sin can only be rooted out and truly forgiven, when this reconciliation by virtue of its own inherent efficacy contains the pledge that the sinner will in future disown and forsake his sin. Christ is a real advocate for sin only to the man who in a living faith has seized Him, the living Saviour, Who then transplants the sinner away from his old life into a new being, and transforms him into a new creature.

Taken in this sense, the thought is one of overwhelming significance. ‘We have an Advocate with the Father, who is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.’ With justice does a commentator on this Epistle draw attention to the fact that, though St. John in other places speaks so seriously about the world, which lies in such evil plight; anxiously as he utters the warning a little further on, ‘Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world;’—nevertheless, in his first mention of the world he shows that it abides in the mercy of Christ; and that the Cross, with its inestimable blessing of the forgiveness of sins, is given to it. And this same mercy, which cannot be obscured even in the deep darkness of the world, but rather illuminates that darkness—this mercy hath lighted upon *thee*. Bestowed upon thee is this Saviour, Who really and truly is the propitiation for thy sins, Who through the shedding of His blood hath covered them over,

and Who, as the risen and ascended Lord, continually maketh intercession for thee, and ever receives anew even the weakest of His followers. Yea, though a hundred times the same old sin comes mocking between thee and thy God, though the hideous spectres of youthful sins rear up their hateful forms, do thou but hold firmly and in faith the Redeemer's hand; He, the righteous and loving High Priest, will not plead for thee in vain. And though a hundred times the weakness of mortal flesh should assert itself—for daily dost thou walk the sinful world, daily dost thou inhale the poisoned air of passion, strife, and envy—yet each day is ruled by the interceding prayer of the Righteous One, Who once pleaded for St. Peter: 'Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat; but I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not.'¹ His intercession is a 'guardian power,' which shields us in temptation's hour; it is our refuge when in the danger of the combat, in anguish of heart, in the confusion of our doubts, we know not how we ought to pray; it guards him, who in deep sincerity *desires* to be guarded, as one redeemed, one dearly bought; it will not leave unfinished the good work begun in him.

He who knows this, he who treasures up this knowledge in a living faith, *must* realize its power, which moves him to abstain from sin, and kills

¹ St. Luke xxii. 31, 32.

all that delight in sin which makes the approach of temptation so terribly perilous; in the power of Christ's intercession he will learn so to walk, even as He walked.

Obedience to a hard master is always hard, but to a kind and loving one always easy. Here is a Saviour Who generates in us what He demands of us. Here is a Saviour in Whose presence all feeble mediocrity must disappear, that spirit, namely, which seeks immunity from guilt and would yet revel in sin, which would hold heaven's door open with one hand, and greet earth with the other. Here is a Master, in following Whom sin of necessity becomes more horrible and hideous to us, and the beautiful and good ever more lovely and attractive—a Master Who teaches us, in fact, to make sin harder and harder for ourselves, and obedience to Him easier and easier; and the more we know and understand Him, the more do we realize the truth of what St. John wrote later on: 'His commandments are not grievous.'¹ Obedience to God becomes light to all who suffer themselves to be led by Him.

III.

How blessed is the lot of those in whose lives is shown forth obedience to God!

Thoroughly contented, at peace with self, and therefore *happy*, we all desire to be. There is but one way which leads to this blissful state—obedi-

¹ 1 John v. 3.

ence to God's commandments. '*Whoso keepeth His word,*' or, as the Apostle immediately afterwards expresses it, '*Whosoever abideth in Him*'—*i.e.*, inseparably joined, bound by the word of Christ, led by the hand of Christ, influenced wholly by the Spirit of Christ—'*in Him verily is the love of God perfected.*'

The love of God; one can indeed take these words as meaning the love of God for us. Taken thus, their sense is perfectly good. Whosoever abideth in Him enjoys fully the warmth of His love; unimpeded, unchecked, it flows in upon him; he has the perfect conviction: 'God is for me; His love is poured out upon me in full, abundant measure.' What profound happiness must possess the human heart which rejoices in such a conviction! If God is for us, then every trial is met with—'It will not harm.' If God is for us, then we can face all perplexities and dangers with blessed resignation. If God is for us, then, with St. Paul, we can look death in the face, and say: 'Nothing shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'¹

But the context shows us here that it is not a question of the love which God has for us, but of the love which *we have to God*. Whosoever keepeth His word, in him truly is the love to God perfected—*i.e.*, he learns fully how to love God.

Now think of this: if a human love, with all

¹ Rom. viii. 39.

its failings and imperfections, can fill a heart with almost inexpressible joy, how should not love to the eternal God, personal love to Jesus Christ, be capable of making a heart rich, happy, blissful!

Wherein, then, consists the blessedness of him who is perfected, but in perfect love to God—a love which is shorn of all shortcomings? If there be a foretaste of heaven here on earth, it can only exist in a personal, earnest love for God, who manifests Himself to man in Jesus Christ. Truly, this love is not merely a gentle emotion, or a feeling, however beautiful, of affection; for, according to the Apostle, loving God is synonymous with *knowing* Christ, Whom He has sent. And again, to *know* Christ is only possible to him who walks even as Christ walked. Love towards God, therefore, is not only a deep affection, but also the deep fact of sanctification and ‘becoming-like’ Christ. Herein is love perfected on this sinful earth, not as it will be perfected in eternity hereafter, but in that it has become something more than a mere emotion—to wit, a firm, holy love, displaying itself in a devout obedience to Him Who is Love. With such love, the Christian bears in himself a certain superiority over the rest of the world. Even as one, who has a bright light in his heart, sees the world around him light, though the blackest clouds are lowering, so to him who has the love of God in his heart does the world become light, even though he stand in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Everywhere

he sees the marks of God's hand ; in the midst of the world's worries he carries with him that blessed joy which the holy love-obedience to God's commandments has wrought in him.

The Apostle has shown us how earnest, how easy, and how joyous is this obedience to God. 'If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them,'¹ said our Lord once. He knows the gulf that separates *doing* from *knowing*. Oh, my beloved fellow-Christians, is it so with us? If so, let us display holy zeal, that we rend not asunder what God has joined together. [True it is that obedience is not possible without sacrifice, and the sacrifice, as the Lord has said, must be salted with salt, and brings with it therefore inevitable pain. But the Christian will not be the loser by such sacrifice ; nay, he will be the gainer for ever ; he will receive an hundredfold. He who looks back and hesitates, questioning whether he will not lose more than he gains, is not yet fit for the kingdom of God. He who offers himself whole-heartedly, in an obedience which is ready for *all*, will receive *all* again, only transfigured and sanctified through his love to God.]

¹ St. John xiii. 17.

IV.

LOVE OF THE BRETHREN.

‘Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning. Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in Him and in you : because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth. He that saith that he is the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.’—I JOHN ii. 7-11.

FOR the third time in the same section a like train of thought is presented to us ; for the same questions and warnings, which figured in the two preceding chapters, are raised and reiterated in the verses before us, with this difference, however—they are approached from a new point of view, that of a *commandment* ; and the general command to walk in the light, as Christ is in the light, is linked to a more definite and daily-to-be-observed one, *i.e.*, love of the brethren.

This homogeneousness of subject-matter is due to a peculiarity of the epistle. There is in it a

certain slowness in the progress of thought ; one might almost say, a kind of monotony is observable. It must not be supposed that this results from the Apostle's advanced age, bringing with it a circumscribed range of thought (though we must remember that St. John had reached a great age when he wrote this epistle). The cause is rather to be sought in the disposition and personal characteristics of the author.

St. John is not a thinker like St. Paul, who in sharply-defined, consistent development, proves his points, and who, by keeping the adversary's position before his mind, cutting the ground from under his objections and refuting them, at one time by the logical sequence of his thoughts, at another by appealing to the testimony of his conscience, forces from him acknowledgment and acquiescence. St. John's characteristic is, rather, that quiet, musing contemplation which, sunk in the depths of a single thought, silently and almost imperceptibly glides from step to step, apparently repeating itself, but in reality ever gathering new riches, new significance, from it. To quote from one of the earlier commentators: ' Thus there runs a certain monotony through all his writings ; it is, however, not that of the mill-wheel, but of the tolling of a bell.' It is always a resonance from above, and re-echoes in the heart, attracting it mightily.

And it is so here. As though recalling his Master's words shortly before His departure hence

—‘ A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another ’¹—the Apostle speaks of an old and yet ever new commandment, which indeed comprises within itself all the requirements of the Christian life, viz., Love of the Brethren.

This may be considered under two heads :

(1) It is new in view of the new Light that has appeared—Christ.

(2) It becomes new for us on account of its significance in the Christian life.

‘ O Holy Love ! I give myself to Thee ;
May I be Thine through all eternity.’

I.

‘ Brethren,’ begins the Apostle, ‘ I write no new commandment unto you.’ Indeed, the Gospel has no new revelation to make on this subject, no new commandment as regards love of the brethren, which would require a higher level of morality or a fuller faith.

Regarding as it does all men as sinners, who can only be saved through grace, it demands of all who have received this grace, without exception, a like sincerity and faithfulness of sanctification. The Apostle has therefore for his hearers no other commandment than the ‘ old ’ one, which (since they became Christians) they had had from the beginning.

And this commandment again is nothing extraordinary. It is nothing else than, as he says, ‘ the

¹ St. John xiii. 34.

word' (*i.e.*, the announcement) 'which ye have heard from the beginning.' The Apostle had already compressed in one short sentence the whole matter at the commencement of his letter, 'God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.' The command for the Christian life contained in these words, namely, the command to walk in the Light after the example and in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, as the sole ideal of truth and sincerity for the Christian, *that* is the old command concerning which he desires to address them anew now.

This command of brotherly love is not one among others, standing on an equality with them; in it all others are contained, in obeying this command all others are obeyed. As the life of Christ is one great manifestation of His love for us, so our life is to be nothing less than a reflection of His, in our love of the brethren. Luther's words in this connection are noteworthy. He says:

'The command of love is a short command and a long command, a single command, and many commands; it is no command, and yet all commands; we have no command to learn, no work to accomplish, other than that which is dictated by love.'

This command is much older than Christianity. Its origin is to be found in the precepts of the Old Testament: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' This is the sum of the whole law. The Gospel declares to us not a new command-

ment, but only the resuscitation of the ancient original will of God, obscured as it had been by human sin and error. And this is the sense in which St. John uses the expression, 'a new commandment.' So that he can say with perfect truth, 'Again, a new commandment I write unto you.' For the old commandment had, in effect, become new in Christ Jesus, and he expressly adds, '*which is true*' (*i.e.*, has become real and living) 'in Him.'

Hitherto this command had shone down from Heaven above like some far-off glittering star, so distant that none could approach and feel its genial warmth; but now it has become real and actual, flesh and blood, life and vigour in our midst, before our very eyes, in the person of the Saviour, Jesus Christ. He alone can say, 'I have kept my Father's commands.' And He has kept the command of brotherly love. He bequeathed to His followers this injunction: 'A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.'¹

It was a touching answer which a little negro boy gave when asked the question:

'Who is love?'

He replied:

'Zaremba is love!'

It was the name of the missionary who had first taught him what love was; to the boy's

¹ St. John xiii. 34.

mind, he who had shown such a beautiful, living example as his teacher had done must indeed be love personified.

With infinitely greater justification do we say, 'Christ is love.' He portrayed love before our eyes in His life. He is what love really is, having assumed human form, being clothed upon with human flesh and blood. He is holy love, one with truth, one with righteousness; love, which punishes and rebukes, and still loves; love whence proceed the strokes of wrath against the sinner, and which yet loves; love which, because it *is* holy, descends even to the wicked and perishing, and with infinite mercy seeks, finds, and loves the most degraded, recognising in each an immortal soul.

And as, in this manner, the new commandment has become 'true' in Christ Jesus, so also is it to be 'in you.' For 'the darkness is past'—literally, 'is passing away'—because 'the true light now shineth.' Dark as the world may still appear to us, despondently and sorrowfully as Christians may gaze upon the darkness of the world, and upon the lovelessness which surrounds them, nevertheless the light is there; it has not only been made living by Christ, but it also shines upon others. As certain as it is that love became *real* in Christ, so certain is it that it can never again be quenched. It will vanquish the darkness, which is surely death-stricken and is passing away.

Those to whom St. John wrote saw this; they experienced the illuminating, burning, purifying

power of the light which had appeared. Yes, the Apostle saw, beyond the darkness of his surroundings, a better, holier future; he saw 'the morning breaking upon humanity'; he saw the faithful reaching their goal, saw them walking in the glory of perfection. Since then well-nigh two thousand years have run. Oh, my brethren, do we partake of that perfection? Has, since then, the darkness been overcome, and has the world become suffused with the light that has appeared? Has darkness been overcome *in us*? Does the true light shine forth from *us*? These are the questions which force themselves upon our conscience.

II.

For this old commandment becomes new for us on account of the significance it has for the Christian life. Its vital importance can be gathered when we remember that it is the test, the one infallible test, of the genuineness of our spiritual life.

We repeat that what is of real moment in the sight of God is not necessarily the measure of our knowledge, not the perfection of our orthodoxy, not our regularity in church-going, or the abundance of our prayers, but the keeping of His commandments. And this keeping of the commandments becomes more definite, clearer, and simpler for us when expressed as the *love of the brethren*.

'For what purpose has God placed men

together?' was a question once asked at a children's 'Catechism.'

The answer was :

'In order that they may love one another.'

For what purpose has God placed thee in thy present position? That thou mayest, as thou art and where thou art, have love for thy brethren. For what purpose has the love of Christ entered into thine heart, making it gentle and affectionate? That thou mayest learn to love thy brethren. Oh thou, who lovest not thy brother, who art cold, callous, living for thyself alone, a pleasure-seeker, intent upon thine own advantage, profess whatsoever thou wilt, only say not thou art walking in the light, presume not to call thyself a Christian. And he who says he is walking in the light, and would be happy in that light, and would persuade himself that he is in a state of grace, and yet hates his brother, he is, alas! plunged in the most fatuous error; he is, as the Apostle says, 'in darkness.'

Mark well here St. John's significant mode of expression. He knows of two opposites only—*loving* and *hating*. He, at least, mentions no intermediate position. It will be said that this antithesis is incorrect. Who among us literally *hates* another? There are surely but very few who would admit that their heart really harboured hate; for what numerous grades there are between the extremes of love and hate! Cold indifference, which we often feel towards stiff, self-contained people, has as little to do with real hatred as the

crossness or ill-humour which sometimes temporarily possesses us.

And yet St. John knows what he is writing about, and he has his reasons for writing as he does. It is true he ignores the intermediate stages between love and hate; but therefore the more strikingly does he lay bare the root that is embedded in our hearts. He knows of only one attitude of the Christian towards his brother, namely, love: that he should heartily desire his welfare, that, as far as in his power lies, he should be ready to do him service, and help him in time of need. Where this holy foundation of love is wanting, a man may say that he regards another with indifference; he may even persuade himself that it is so; indeed, this may really be the case as long as that other does not interfere with his interests, thwart his plans, or in any way cause him inconvenience. But the moment this happens, indifference will turn to dislike; and the more his affairs are touched or damaged, the more will this dislike increase, the more will the wish grow to shake the other off, to slight him, to set him aside, to do him harm. It becomes more and more like hate. 'But he that hateth his brother is in darkness.'

And notice here too the sense in which St. John always uses brotherly love. He is not speaking in a general way of human love, which recognises all as brethren; nor yet of the love engendered by relationship or fellow-feeling.

The love of the brethren which he means has its basis in a common love to our Lord. It has its foundation in that mystic communion with the Saviour whereby men are joined together through being members of the Body of Jesus Christ. This love, just because it is something altogether different from every form of natural love, is the loftiest and the most perfect manifestation of all human love. And therefore it is impossible that it should be wanting wherever there is real fellowship with God.

Wheresoever, then, this is absent from Christians, disciples of a loving Master, who profess to be nourished by His Holy Spirit, and who instead of showing love foster strife and bitterness, envy and malice, there Christ abideth not, neither can there be fellowship with Him; no light is there, but darkness. As one, wandering in the dark, loses himself and goes astray, so he who has no love strays ever further from the light; he fails to recognise the Divine grace and salvation, he becomes ever less capable of receiving strength from above; his interests become more and more centred around self; hating and loveless, he grasps after that which will bring unhappiness, and which leads eventually to death; 'the darkness hath blinded his eyes.'

He who hates his brother is in darkness, and walks in darkness. In proportion as the light which shines forth from Christ exercises its influence over us, so will genuine love of the brethren

take root in our hearts and shoot upwards. Hate, animosity, indifference, are only possible in the darkness; only there, that is, where the heart has thrown off the holy influence of Christ. Therefore only he who has love of the brethren may rejoice and glory in the fellowship of his Lord. This is the one test of walking in the light; it is the only means whereby we can continue in the light. If there is to be 'none occasion of stumbling' in us, *i.e.*, nothing which will cause us to fall, nothing which will cause separation from the fellowship of Christ, let us love the brethren sincerely, tenderly, and with all humility. Without this love our religion is but a feeble edifice, which the first gust of wind will overturn. Without it we are but wandering in the darkness (in spite of all our supposed orthodoxy and blamelessness), straying ever nearer to the precipice, and sooner or later destruction will overtake us. It was not long after the Apostle wrote, that a heathen gave this as a characteristic of Christians: 'They love one another without even knowing one another;' and, 'Their Master has persuaded them that they are all brethren.'

Beloved fellow-Christians, can we say this to-day? Canst thou claim this as a characteristic? Name those whom thou hast loved, not from selfish motives, but for the sake of Christ, as His brethren. How many dost thou number?

NOTE.—The third section of this chapter has been purposely omitted, as it deals mainly with social dangers in Germany, which would probably not interest English readers. No further elucidation of the text of the epistle is contained in the omitted section.—*Trans.*

V.

LOVE NOT THE WORLD.

‘I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His Name’s sake. I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known Him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known Him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the Word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one. Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in Him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof : but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’—I JOHN ii. 12-17.

WE noticed one of the great dangers which menace our spiritual life, in the chapter : ‘God is Light’—the danger of unguineness. We are in the present chapter brought face to face with another—the danger of worldliness in our personal religion.

We live in the world, breathe in its atmosphere ; we are attached to the world by a thousand ties, are linked to it with a thousand chains. Is it a great marvel, then, if the world influences our innermost thoughts and feelings, our religion, our faith, our relationship to God ?

This danger is no new one, dating from the present age; it is as old as Christianity itself. Long ago men sought to avoid it by fleeing from the evil world into the monastery or the wilderness, and leaving worldly things to their fate. But they learned that they carried in *themselves* the sinful world, and that it went with them into the cloister, yea, into the solitude of the wild waste.

To-day we set ourselves a different task, and one more reasonable; not fleeing from the world, but *transforming* it, is our watchword. But we have not escaped the opposite danger. Nowadays more than ever men have come to regard Christianity and the world not as two antagonistic principles, they seek, rather, as far as possible to reconcile the two together. The result of this has been not, alas! the Christianizing of the world, but the secularization of Christianity. Let us boldly look this danger in the face, taking as our guide the stern words of the Apostle, with their inflexible demands, with their call to battle against the world.

'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.'

Let us weigh the intense seriousness of the warning which St. John points his hearers to: *'Love not the world.'* What manner of world is it of which the Apostle speaks? Is it not the same world which in another place he holds up as the object of Divine love? *'God so loved the world*

that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.¹

Has He not, in the verses immediately preceding our present section, been urging love of the brethren, *i.e.*, those who are in the world? How, then, can he now continue: 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world'? The apparent contradiction is explained by a glance at the twofold element which exists in the world. On the one hand, it was created by the hand of God, and as the creature of Almighty God it is, even though fallen, the object of His love—of His saving mercy. Just for this reason the Apostle requires that we should love the world (*i.e.*, the brethren in the world), which is the object of redemption. But, on the other hand, the world has in it that which is sinful, that which opposes itself to God; so that of necessity he who holds with the world is separated from God. The more pronounced this feature is, the more strenuously does the Apostle insist upon the warning: 'Love not the world.' He sees in the world a threefold species of sin, 'the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.' These are 'not of the Father,' therefore they may not be the objects of our love.

It is self-evident that the Apostle does not, by these expressions, refer simply to outbursts of lust in its most loathsome form, or to exhibitions

¹ St. John iii. 16.

of unbridled temper and pride, as though any of us might console ourselves with the thought that we are excluded from this category : he describes rather the underlying spiritual essence, that which lies beneath the surface, the motive-power which produces the endless activities of sinful humanity, for it is here that the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life are generated :¹ *the lust of the flesh, i.e.*, that which has no desire other than that of sensual indulgence ; however refined, however elevated, it may be, its great objective is nevertheless enjoyment ; *the lust of the eyes, i.e.*, that which eagerly yearns for carnal delights, busies itself with the search for new allurements, and grasps at all that is agreeable and fascinating to the eye ; and the *pride of life, i.e.*, that which seeks, by means of a life of luxury and pleasure, to pander solely to the selfish *ego*, and to magnify its own miserable personality by means of every outward glamour and lustre.

We must be blind indeed if we cannot see in the world of to-day all these traits which the Apostle notes in his surroundings. We live in an age in which increase of wealth and a growing empire have more than ever concentrated the mind and powers of men upon externals—in an age in which the needs of the inner man have been almost wholly overlooked and neglected through the spirit of worldliness which has possessed a large proportion

¹ St. Matt. xv. 19: 'For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.'

of our race. We live moreover in a city¹ which, through the immensity of its wealth, its increasing population, and the attractive-power which it exercises upon strangers, has heaped up within its walls every conceivable form of enjoyment. How many temples of sensual pleasure, offering delights ranging from the most vulgar to the most refined, are there not in our midst! How many sights, from the highest form of artistic perfection to the grossest coarseness, are not daily advertised! How ensnaring and intoxicating is their influence and attractiveness upon youthful temperaments, and upon the thousands of those who, alone and uncared-for, away from the hallowing influence of home and family, are exposed to their seductive power!

Alas! what a world of pride, make-believe, vanity, ambition, show, and pomp, in manifold form and guise, is to be daily witnessed in our streets!

And this way of the world is the more dangerous because of its curiously mixed qualities. It is not *wholly* bad—not wholly corrupt; that would in itself disgust; that which is vulgar, pure and simple, would be revolting to numberless men. But it is bad, and yet *apparently* good at the same time. It is able, by means of its ideals, such as they are, to conceal the undercurrent of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. It

¹ Berlin; but does not the same apply with even greater force to London?—*Trans.*

knows, and especially at the present day, how to surround what is low with what is apparently decent. It understands how to make what is vulgar *appear* as if it were not vulgar, that which is dishonourable as not dishonourable and contemptible, but as something natural, or at least unavoidable, provided that outward appearances are sustained by the cover of an assumed respectability, however spurious. It has even invented its own style of language, in order to make indecency appear, as it were, decent; for example, it speaks of something which is really improper as not vulgar, but 'realistic' or 'piquant.'

Then again, think of the vanity and pride which is permitted with equanimity as long as it does not become irksome. There is a kind of silent understanding among men whereby each tolerates the other's vanity, in order that his own may not be offended. With what cleverness do men reckon upon this instinct of vanity, when they wish to gain that which will serve their own selfish ends!

Tell me, am I wrong when I say that these are all traits not of a lost, degraded humanity, but characteristics which are to be found among us all, who desire to be regarded as Christians? It is just here that the terrible danger lies. All of us who breathe in the air of the age, and inhale its world-tainted atmosphere, have our hand in the secularization of Christianity. Let us carefully think of this. While daily our spiritual

pores are opened to receive into our system the world with all its beauty and splendour, but also with all its poison and its strife and ambition, does our inner man, in the same measure, open itself out to the deep and silent influence of the Divine Spirit of eternity? Whilst we are in the midst of all the wear and tear of life—the daily concentration of all our powers which sinful human activity entails—do not, in the same proportion, our quiet hours become rarer, our receptiveness for that which is holy less, our relations with God more distant? Whilst this gay world dazzles us with its splendour, as though *it* alone were lasting and real, does not the living God become ever less known to us, less distinct, as though separated by immeasurable distance?

Ah, yes, He is one factor in our life—for surely we all believe in His existence—but He is not that factor which is all-deciding. Thou believest that there is a God above, but He influences thee but little; He is not *thy* God, the God of thy salvation, whose hand guides thee through the dark valley. When every covering of self-deception has been removed, then thou wilt see, oh, pious, would-be religious man—thou wilt see with horror how far more important to thee are thy position, thy wealth, thy respectability, thy comfort, than thy God and Saviour! Do you understand now, dear readers, why the Apostle warns so earnestly, ‘Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world’? Or do you

really believe, if he were to repeat his words to-day in a world which has been Christianized, that he would see any necessity for detracting from his severity? 'Love not the world.' My soul yearns for what I love. I *live* in what I love, I exist thereby; it becomes unconsciously part of my life, my thoughts, my dreams. What I love, in fact, becomes ever more and more part of my very self. He who loves the world becomes a worldly, *beworloded* man. He who feeds on the fare of fleshly lust, he who, regardless of choice or care in his reading, in his intellectual food upon which he daily feeds, fills his eyes and fancy with pictures of carnal delight—such a man ought not to wonder if God recedes further and further into the distance. With such, whose one happiness is to decorate their miserable little selves with contemptible adornment, in order to be admired and highly thought of by men—with such, I say, love to God becomes an impossibility; for such, there is, in plain language, nothing in God to love; for these, there is nothing in the 'narrow way' which can offer happiness, they see in it only that which gives the death-blow to all their pleasures and fancies; the very thought of God can only bring a disturbing element into their souls.

It is quite comprehensible that people who live for the world should keep religion as far as possible from them, and consider it as something disagreeable when their relationship to God is brought seriously before them. The more, how-

ever, the thought of God is regarded as disquieting and uncongenial, the more does there rise up a secret dislike and aversion to Him. It is true in a literal sense that, 'Whosoever loveth the world, in him is not the love of the Father.' The higher a man has stood heretofore, the more terribly is the judgment carried out, the more does he become like that Demas of whom St. Paul wrote to Timothy that he had forsaken him, having loved this present world.¹ How many blows and judgments of God may not be necessary to sober thee, world-intoxicated man, and to bring thee out of thy insensibility!

And if the warning comes home, where is the strength to make thee, weak man, capable of resisting, to make thee strong enough to overcome the seductive pleasures which surround thee? This is the question which loudly calls for an answer; the answer lies in the words with which the Apostle prepares his readers for that warning, 'Love not the world.' In truth, the question is answered in wondrous wise, when the Apostle addresses his hearers according to their ages, and holds before them with wonderful power the precious gifts they have received.

By this means he seeks to make them strong in their resistance to the world. What they possess is in itself far more powerful than all the seductive arts of the world. Child of God, mayst thou become conscious of the hallowed height

¹ 2 Tim. iv. 10.

whereon thou standest ; mayst thou realize the whole wealth of grace and gifts which thou hast received. Then compare with this all that the poor world, with its fleeting pleasures, has to offer. Surely then must its glowing glory pale, its deceitful forms be dispersed as mist ! This is the power of resistance with which the Apostle would furnish us, *i.e.*, to realize the God-given power within us. Like a Christian patriarch, he addresses himself first of all to the *whole* community with tender expression—‘My little children!’ He includes all, young and old, when he says : ‘I write unto you, because your sins are forgiven you for His (Christ’s) Name’s sake.’ He is not regarding his readers as perfected Christians, as those who can sin no more, or as those who never had sinned. They were of the same flesh and blood as we are, and suffered the same temptations and conflicts which we daily experience. But one thing they possess, as we do too, which can save them in their sorrow and guilt : they partake of the grace of God ; they have, in the precious name of Jesus, the seal of forgiveness. Whatever they may lack, however often they may stumble, the entrance into the house of their Father shall never again be closed ; the ‘Righteous Advocate’ leads the long-lost child to the steps of the Father’s throne.

Oh, wondrous peace given to mortal man ! The world and the lusts thereof only make the heart heavier, more sorrowful, and more dissatisfied ;

even the delights of intellect leave but a void at the last—a void which the great poet-philosopher¹ himself bemoans :

‘ Alas, I am a-weary of life’s activity ;
I ask me, To what purpose all pain and pleasure here ?’

But he who is reconciled to God has a perennial spring whence he may drink life and happiness—a holy fountain-head to which he may ever come again. Yes, just when the world and all its pleasures has been renounced, in the days of sorrow and pain, in old age, at the hour of death, there rises up in the power of the grace of forgiveness the hope, imperishable and inextinguishable, of eternal bliss.

This is the basis upon which St. John now founds his words to the various classes of his hearers. He sees his flock, consisting of old and young, fathers and children. To each in particular he addresses himself, and to each he repeats his words twice, in order to lay special stress upon them. First, the fathers: ‘ I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known Him that is from the beginning,’ *i.e.*, Christ. It is not experience which makes matured age strong in resisting the world, not the growth of authority, with its deeper knowledge of men and matters, not the gradual flickering of youthful lusts and passions. Venerable age may frequently be thus distinguished ; but, alas ! much oftener the

¹ Goethe.

indulgences of youth become the habit of old age, and the customs of a lifetime become indispensable towards its end, and the shackles self-forged in years gone by it is impossible to shake off in the eventide of life. Even among those well advanced in years may be seen the attenuated frame, emptied of every thought of God, gazing back, clutching at the world, even when standing on the very threshold of death's domain. No, it is not mature age which of itself gives power of resistance, but only *turning to* and *believing in* Him 'who was from the beginning,' but Who entered into the world in the fulness of time to disclose the vision of eternity, and to sanctify humanity by Himself assuming human form. Blessed is the man who, as the years advance, can look back upon this hallowed experience, who knows that the Gospel has been a power in his life—a power which drew him, and bound him, and kept him chained until Christ's life had quickened him, until Christ's power had conquered him, upon whom the marks of Christ's character have been impressed, so that he is able to realize that Jesus Christ has indeed become the anchor of his hope. 'To know Him' is the same as loving Him; but to love Him means to live in Him, and partake of His power. Such experience the world knows nothing of; in face of it the world's light vanishes. This experience makes men sober, modest, serious, and faithful. You, fathers and mothers, who know Him who was

from the beginning, and who will not let Him go—see that ye ‘love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.’

And in like manner the Apostle speaks to the young men: ‘I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one.’ His method of procedure is significant: at the side of mature age, with its memories of a holy experience and its advance to firm ground, he places growing youth. Youth is soft, impressionable; in youth the strong and untamed lusts of the flesh and eyes, and the pride of life storm and rage in tumultuous whirl. Much more than we elder men does youth realize that painful conflict between the law of God and the law of sin, that struggle for mastery in our members, under the weight of which every noble nature sighs.¹ The Apostle therefore demands of youth, above all things, the virtue of Christian courage and manliness. Step forth, thou youthful hero, who art called to be a champion of the Cross; thou art not bidden to look for thy victory in the far distance; thou hast already overcome the Evil One, if thou truly desirest to belong to thy Saviour, for the prince of this world has nothing in Him. Thou hast both Satan and the world at thy feet, as long as thou abidest in His word, looking to Him as the light of thy conscience and the guide of thy feet. Behold thy liberty! behold thy high honour! And with respect to *our* battles and

¹ Rom. vii.

our victories, what have we to say? Oh Christians, must we not hide our faces when we see the numbers that are overcome—conquered, lying prone, assassinated by their own sins, which have mastered them, through the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and through the pride of life? Oh that we might burn into the hearts of the young the unspeakable blessing there is in a pure, uncorrupted youth, which glides into maturer age without painful breaks, without smarting scars, without a leaf in the book of life of which to be ashamed, without dark memories torturing the heart, and which the heart would fain forget! And on the other hand, what a curse, poisoning both the inner and the outer life, lies in a wasted, blemished youth—how often, alas! the barrier which, right up to old age, bars the way to God! You young men all have your sensitive, but often foolish, conceptions of honour—let *this* be your honour: to stand firm against the temptations of the flesh, and to remain unsullied in your body, soul, and conscience. Ye seek freedom and independence, so often harmful to your age and unripe experience, so often, too, another name for license and self-will—let *this* be your liberty: to be free from pride and lust, by learning to bend your proud neck to the gentle yoke of Christ, and by not being ashamed of His word, nor afraid of praying and coming to His house, nor of being fearful of the gibes of others, whom, in the depths of your heart, you despise. ‘Steel’

yourselves with strength, unseen of man, but approved by God. Stand firm in the evil day. Call upon God to confirm your resolutions. Regard every step reached in the combat for freedom as an earnest of future success. Strengthen yourselves in the recollection of what you have become, and let this recollection help you in fighting the Evil One, who ever seeks to draw you downwards again with the miserable chains of lust. Appropriate to yourselves, by means of a pure youth, the right of a hallowed old age, yea, more, the right of a youth which lasts eternally. Take the best, yea, all her beauty, from the world, for all is yours, if ye are Christ's, but love not that which is essentially 'the world's'—for that will drag you to perdition, since the fashion of this world passeth away. How quickly is the cup emptied, how quickly follow the bitter dregs! How quickly fly past us the shadow of life's pretty pictures! In vain do we stretch out our hands to detain them but a moment longer. And terrible, ghastly, is the thought, that suddenly the possibility of enjoyment ceases, while the desire thereof continues! But he who is rooted and grounded in the strength of God *abides*, while the world falls and passes hence. 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever'—he cannot perish, for he bears in himself eternal life.

Beloved in Christ Jesus, God has fixed a Rock of Refuge in the midst of this world's troublous waters that rage around us in lust-tempting whirl-

pools; upon this Rock we can save ourselves, and not perish. 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.' If the Apostle's words have moved our hearts, have awakened us to a sense of guilt, have led us to renewed repentance, let us take refuge upon this Rock, and become strong, by obedience to the will of God, by holy love of the brethren; and let us learn, by the grace of God, not to love the world, neither the things that are in the world.

VI.

THE LAST HOUR.

‘Little children, it is the last time:¹ and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us. But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things. I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: but he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also. Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise that He hath promised us, even eternal life. These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you. And the anointing which ye have received of Him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in Him.’—I JOHN ii. 18-27.

UNDOUBTEDLY these words have for us a strange sound. We could well understand them if they were addressed to individuals in the form, ‘It is thy last hour.’ Such an appeal always finds an echo in our hearts; none of us knows how near his last hour

¹ R.V. ‘the last hour.’

is. Nothing is more certain for us, each and all, than death; but the Apostle uses these words in a different sense here. He is speaking of a certain development in the world and of the kingdom of God therein. And the last hour of this development has sounded. At a time when, according to our ideas, a better dawn was beginning to break upon the world through the Gospel of Christ, St. John conceived rather of the approach of night. As a matter of fact, century after century has been marked by the appearance of new forces and startling developments in the world's history; and at every such crisis pious Christians have exclaimed with the Apostle: 'It is the last hour.' If, therefore, after eighteen centuries the accuracy of this apostolic dictum is still apparently far from being justified by facts, can we nevertheless trust his warning? Can we be expected to lay it to heart? Let us consider whether, and in what sense, these words have a message for us.

I.

Careful readers of the Bible know that the whole of the Old Testament is impregnated with thoughts of the preparation and expectation of coming Redemption. It contemplates a deliverance which from century to century is more ardently longed for, more clearly recognised, and which eventually appears in the Person of Jesus Christ. This time of 'fulfilment' all the prophets

and their successors, the Apostles, call 'the last time.' Now, the whole of the New Testament is pervaded by a passionate yearning that this realized redemption, this manifested Redeemer, should, with unchecked progress, hasten through the world upon the wings of His triumphant word — all-conquering, all-transforming; and, finally, His foretold humiliation being accomplished, that He should manifest Himself to His own in the full glory for which they had waited with longing hearts. The holy writers of the Bible resemble the pilgrim before whose eyes the longed-for goal of his wanderings appears, but who forgets, in the eagerness of his gaze, the many turns, declivities and steeps that separate him from his journey's end; they overlooked the intervening years; they thought they would even live to see what, alas! was shrouded in dim futurity.

Thus had St. Paul and St. Peter passed away; only St. John stands solitary, the last of the apostolic band, and marks with watchful eye the signs of the times. In the stupendous convulsions of his day, in the ferment of men's minds which the leaven of the Gospel had brought about, and by which he himself was affected, he sees 'the last time' approaching, the advent of the last hour.

'Children,' he writes, 'it is the last hour; . . . even now there are many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.'

‘Many antichrists!’ St. John does not mean simply ‘many unbelievers’; they had not increased—rather the contrary. During the time at which the Apostle wrote the different assemblies of Christians were like solitary beacons in a world of darkness. Neither does St. John refer simply to the adversaries of the new teaching. That the light of Christianity could only grow by means of spiritual combat and active opposition against the prevailing darkness was not the less to be expected than that there should be apostates; had not a Judas betrayed the Fountain-head of Christianity? The Apostle speaks of ‘antichrists’ as of those who had come to a knowledge of Christ (‘they went out from us’), and who had yet knowingly and deliberately set themselves against Him. They were those who, knowing full well the glory of the Lord, yet denied that ‘Jesus was the Christ,’ *i.e.*, the Anointed, the Saviour of the world—people who, instead of looking upon Him as their Redeemer, regarded themselves as their own saviours, thus bringing confusion and perplexity into the circle of believers.

St. John, in fact, points us to the first appearance of that ever-recurring, bewildering paradox, that the most dangerous enemies and embarrassing problems of the Church emanate from the Church herself; that from within the fold arises resistance to God, owing to the introduction of human schemes of salvation; as though there were no need for a Redeemer, as though men

could reach Heaven by their own unaided efforts ! It is a law in the development of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, that the more it spreads, the more vehement does the opposition of the Evil One become, and that every new position gained for Christ becomes the special object of onslaught on the part of the powers of evil ; but this avowed enmity is to be found not only in the outside world which knows nothing of the Light, but also, alas ! within the circle of believers—‘ they went out from us.’

This antichristian spirit has raged in the Church in all ages, and has usually centred in some great historical event or personage. It was seen in pre-Reformation times, when the Church had become corrupted, and dangerous superstitions had usurped the place of true religion ; it is seen equally, at the present day, in the proud, self-satisfied wisdom of the world which, denying sin and redemption, deifies itself ; it appears, in a different form, as the violent opponent of the Gospel precepts, as the upholder of carnal license, as the destructive enemy of all that shelters modesty and propriety ; it has, in our day, risen to such a pitch as to be verily possessed with a demoniacal hatred of everything that is Christlike. In all these things the Apostle would recognise, not different and varying influences, but one and the same power, which is ever appearing in some new guise, but in which the spirit of evil may always be discerned. St. Paul, in his second Epistle to the Thessalonians,

calls it the 'mystery of iniquity';¹ St. John speaks of it as the 'antichrist'; and when he sees its beginnings in the contradiction and confusion which false teachers had occasioned, and therefore is led to believe that the last hour is approaching—he may have been mistaken with regard to the *time* of that hour, which our heavenly Father has made known to no man;² but he certainly, and with perfect clearness, pointed to that *spirit of antichrist* which, without doubt, will precede the 'last hour' for which we Christians are preparing day by day. While the Gospel silently but surely carries on its holy, saving work in the souls of men, the spirit of antichrist ceaselessly weaves the web of destruction, and seeks to entangle them in its cruel meshes.

It is the 'last hour'; the length of its duration we know not; but its signs are there, and what we neglect in this 'hour' may, perchance, never be remedied.

II.

And what is to be our attitude in view of the approach of this 'last hour'? The Apostle's teaching is of a threefold character; first, *be calm, be of good courage!* What is happening, he seems to say, was foreseen—was foretold. Painful and perplexing though it be that strife concerning the very foundations of the faith should rage in the Christian Church, that among the children of one Mother, among partakers of the same Altar, one

¹ 2 Thess. ii. 7.

² St. Mark xiii. 32.

should cry 'Aye,' another, 'No,' that the bitterest foes of Christ should be found in the ranks of Christians—nevertheless, the Apostle comforts us: 'They went out from us, but they were not of us'; otherwise they would surely have been of one Faith and of one Body!

It is a fact that there are those within the Church who are untouched by her spirit, who care not for her worship, who are discontented with her very constitution. Within the visible company of the baptized there is but a small number who have wholly and unreservedly dedicated their lives to God; they cannot be identified by man, God alone knows those who are His. It is, moreover, as we have seen, an inevitable accompaniment of the Church's growth that those who do not really belong to her should dissociate themselves from her, that those who neither desire nor feel the need of a Saviour should sever every tie which binds them to her. Each case of this kind must be a cleansing, a purification, for the Church. Every rotten or alien member which is cut off must be for the Church a strengthening of her inner being, even though outwardly she may appear damaged and weakened. I will go further: supposing that there should come a great falling-away of the visible members, supposing the fearful catastrophe to take place which has sometimes been prophesied, that the mass of nominal Christians, those who are only Christians in name and habit, should turn their backs

on Christianity and actively oppose it—well, then, I reply, that the three hundred men whom Gideon chose from the thirty thousand were not only stronger than these latter, but were also stronger than the one hundred and twenty-five thousand Midianites who were overcome by them.¹ *One* true Christian has in him the power which will overcome the world. To fear for the kingdom of God is a contradiction, for where fear is, there is no real faith in the redeeming power of Christ.

These *real* Christians would conquer, invisibly it might be, the whole world; around them would cluster all who had any wish for peace and holiness and salvation. Let these genuine Christians but come forth, and the whole power of the Gospel would be revealed. And thus, just that time of outward falling-away would be the time of the highest spiritual triumph—the herald of the Gospel victory!

But, dear Christians, it is not for us to bring about or to force this time of separation, even though we live in an age of unreality and lukewarmness. To attempt to sift out the numberless half-hearted, nominal Christians, in order that there may be a select company of the faithful ones—this task is not ours. Far from it! God the Father alone can do that, and at some time He will perhaps do it. But *our* duty consists in this, that our religion should ever gain fuller mastery over our hearts, that it should ever

¹ Judges vii.

more and more rule and guide every action in our life, that it should become ever more apparent in our daily round, so that the inner power and love of Christ should shine forth ever more brightly from within us; then, of their own accord, would those whose religion is only outward, unreal, sham, withdraw themselves, while those who yearn for the strength of such faith would be more powerfully attracted.

Again, in the second place, the Apostle bids us *be simple-hearted!* St. John expresses this in a manner which to our ears perhaps sounds strange: 'Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.' 'Ye have an unction,' the 'Chrisma'; that means: 'Ye are Christians, anointed ones, sanctified.' The Apostle emphasizes thereby the honourableness of our position, in order that he may bring to our remembrance its tremendous obligations. 'Ye are sanctified, anointed with the Holy Spirit—become *wholly* what ye are in part.' He does not write to those who know not the truth, but to those who know it, to those who can differentiate between what is holy truth and what is a lie, and who can therefore stand undismayed in the midst of these troublous times.

Let us, then, *become* what we are, viz., Christians, anointed with the Spirit of God. He who submits to the discipline of the Holy Spirit, who obeys the ordering of His still small voice, who suffers no violence to be done to his conscience,

will be transported into the pure atmosphere of truth, where the power of the tempter will have lost its strength. Here he gains new wealth of spiritual perception, which teaches him the essential difference between truth and falsehood, and enables him to see through all those coverings wherewith men seek to conceal truth, or make a lie acceptable, because it has a veneer of truth. The Spirit teaches us to see the features of our Saviour at every turn, even when they become obscured by the hum of many voices and the noise of many opinions, for He knows that 'no lie is of the truth,' but that the Lord will lead His beloved into all truth. This holy simplicity is never narrow in its conception; it is the result of the Holy Spirit's influence upon us, it perceives in all things the guiding hand from above; it cares little for outward *forms* and *formulas*, but rather for the visible signs of the influence of Jesus Christ; it harbours the holy resolution, that it will be taught by 'the unction of the Spirit' which it has received to make no compact with the world, and that every effort shall be directed towards the glorifying of Christ and His word.

And in the third place St. John bids us *be resolute!* 'But as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you *ye shall abide* in Him.' The fight is a stern one; of this there can be no doubt. It is a matter of life and death; it is for

the honour of Christ. It involves the alternative whether humanity will suffer itself to be redeemed by Jesus Christ the Son of God, or whether, in its blindness, it will perish in the search for a salvation of its own devising. St. John points to the contrast with the utmost definiteness, for it is a question of truth or falsehood, between which there can be no sort of compromise.

It may appear strange to us when he says, 'Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ?' How many there are who stand afar off and wait even now for the coming of the Messiah who has not yet been manifested to them; men, noble and upright men, who perhaps from the highest motives of conviction occupy their present position! Mark you, St. John refers not to such; these are yet to become what God will have them be. The man who honestly seeks his God, and yet for the sake of truth stands aloof from us, will yet find that he is on the path which leads to God his Saviour. But still the Apostle is firm when he says that Divine truth and salvation are in Christ only, and that apart from Him all is untruth and a lie. 'Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father.' He may be able to have some distant conception of God apart from His Son, and herein there is, of course, some degree of happiness, but the Father Himself he cannot have; of the Father's essential being he can have no idea; into the Father's heart, with its pity and love for a sinful world, he

cannot gaze; the Father's hand which guides his life, making it ever holier and purer—of this he knows nothing. He can never experience what it is to have the Father's loving glance fixed on him in mercy every moment of his life. All this can only be when the love of God has blossomed in the heart, and when the supremest pledge of that love has been realized in the vision of the Cross of His Son, Jesus Christ.

'He that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also.' Whosoever has learned to recognise in the holy example of Jesus Christ the ideal of his life, whose conscience strikes in harmonious accord with the Word of God, and whose heart is intent upon obedience to His will—to him is revealed a new relationship to God; he gains 'the promise that He hath promised us, even eternal life.' But this man knows too that if he silenced the voice of conscience and suppressed the yearnings of his heart he would be fighting against the truth—he would be making Jesus Christ 'a liar.' Hence the impressiveness of the apostolic admonition: 'Let that therefore abide in you which ye have heard from the beginning'! And let it therefore be for us all a call to holy *resolution*! We must know definitely how we stand, under whose banner we are fighting. Just as Moses cried to the undecided ones among the people, 'Who is on the Lord's side? let him come unto me,'¹ so let those be ranged together who are

¹ Exod. xxxii. 26.

Christ's, and who seek their salvation in Him. Whether the ancient Greeks were right, when they insisted that every citizen should belong to one or other of the political parties, may be a matter open to question; but an undecided neutrality in the presence of Jesus Christ is an impossibility.

‘He that is not with Me is against Me.’¹ Let us then abide faithfully in Him. Greater than all worldly wisdom is that of the Catechism, where belief is expressed in ‘God the Son, who redeemed me and all mankind.’² Let us continue true to Him, following in His footsteps, guided by His Word, lifting up our eyes to Him who is the Author and Finisher of our Faith.

‘Little children, it is the last hour!’ Is it *thy* last hour? Who can tell? He who leaves undone the duty of to-day may not have the chance of doing it to-morrow! We may not dally with time. Up, then! make choice *to-day* with firm resolve.

¹ St. Luke xi. 23.

² In the original the Lutheran catechism is quoted: ‘Mein Herr, der mich verlorenen und verdammten Menschen erlöset hat.’

VII.

ABIDE IN HIM.

‘And now, little children, abide in Him; that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. If ye know that He is righteous, ye know that everyone that doeth righteousness is born of Him. Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew not Him. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure.’—1 JOHN ii. 28-iii. 3.

THE Apostle’s words carry us into the pure atmosphere of the sanctuary; contrast herewith the restlessness of the outer world, the rush of work, the anxiety of business, the whirl of society and its incessant clash of opposing interests! The Apostle sees before him in his mind’s eye his little flock, which has forgotten the outside world, in order to devote itself wholly to the worship of the Father, Who in His inexpressible love has made them His children, and they abide in the blessed hope of His promise, and prepare themselves for the day of Jesus Christ, by severing all carnal ties whereby they are attached to the world. And in order that nothing

be lost of the grace and gifts of God, St. John, urged by holy love, and convinced of the near approach of the last hour, cries out : ' And now, little children, abide in Him !'

I can fully realize the feelings of the man who understands these words to mean that he is to be transported into another world, into a world which has no connection, no point of contact with *his* world, wherein he lives and moves. I can also realize his feelings when he comes to the conclusion that such a pure, supramundane religion cannot be of any use to him, cannot give him strength and help in his daily trials and troubles. It causes me no surprise when the world scoffs and shrugs its shoulders at a gathering such as we can imagine St. John to have been addressing, for did not St. John himself say, ' The world knoweth you not, for it knoweth not Him ' ?

And yet, dear readers, let us not deceive ourselves, for it is just in this essential supramundane character of the Gospel that its whole strength lies. Only *that* faith which recognises another, a better world can aid us in resisting this. Only *that* religion can give us strength, and exercise an influence over our lives, which seeks its inspiration from the holy sanctuary of God on high. The only real protection we have from the world and its ever-changing scenes is in withdrawing ourselves into the secret stillness of God's presence, far from the world and its noisy crowd. And He

in Whom this holier world has become visible, and Who reveals it to us, is just that Saviour, Jesus Christ, of whom St. John says, 'Abide in Him!' If that higher world is not to be closed to us, if that sanctuary yonder is to give us strength for our daily task, to transfigure us, to keep us in the fellowship of God, then let us take heed to the Apostle's cry :

' Little children, abide in Him !'

I.

There are certain verses in the Bible which have become especially endeared to all Christians. This is one of them : ' Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.'

What is it which makes these words so soul-stirring that, for example, native Africans have described the Bible simply as the book which contains them ; that a Hindoo, so touched by them, wished the translation into his own tongue to run : ' Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be *permitted to kiss His feet*' ?

The reason is, that the actual fact of which the Apostle here speaks is of the most vital importance to every single human being, without any exception. St. John does not merely utter the dictum of a sage, nor merely the great thought of a thinker, nor merely a profound axiom which the seeker after truth has with infinite pains brought

to light, but a blessed experience, so stupendous, so overwhelming, that his venerable hand seems to tremble as he writes it.

And then, again, how did St. John gain this holy experience? Not while pursuing his vocation on the beach at Bethsaida, not during those days when he followed the Baptist along Jordan's banks. He learned it at the side of his Saviour, from whom he heard the words: 'He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.'¹ Yes, he realized it when he himself wrote: 'But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God.'²

Christians, the privilege of being 'children of God,' concerning which St. John speaks here, does not rest upon the fact of creation, by means of which our heavenly Father gave us life and breath. We only see these children as those who have marred the divine image which was impressed on them at creation, as those who quarrel and fight among themselves—worse, who in mad rebellion raise their impotent hand against the Father who called them into being. No, the privilege of being the children of God rests upon the fact of *Redemption*. God does not forsake those whom He has once created in His own image.

But since even the Divine counsels could not stem the course of human sin, therefore God, in His infinite love for this apostate, ungrateful, sin-

¹ St. John xiv. 9.

² St. John i. 12.

ful, perishing world, spared not His only-begotten Son. The eternal Word became incarnate and dwelt among us, in order that humanity, born in sin, might partake of a new birth through the Spirit of God!

We are *called* the children of God; thus does St. John emphasize the truth that this is the free gift of the grace of God, for He has raised us from the depth of misery and woe to the glorious height of Divine childhood. But God gives no name, no privilege without its essential reality. 'We are the sons of God,' adds St. John. Truly, not only are we 'called' so, but we 'are' the sons of God: 'Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of His creatures,'¹ writes St. James. By the power of His grace, the sign and impress of God's children is given to us. Just as Christ, 'the firstborn among many brethren,'² bears in Himself the exact image of the Father, so should we, born by His power and through the fellowship of the Father's Spirit, bear in ourselves the Father's form and likeness.

An alteration is to be brought about in us, a change, whereby new powers, new love, *new motives*, will be called into being. Just for this reason the Apostle continues: 'Therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew not Him.' How should the world discover the likeness of God in His children when they know not God

¹ St. Jas. i. 18.

² Rom. viii. 29.

whom they resemble? How should the world have an eye for the beauty of God's children when they are blind to the glory of God Himself? And how can the children of God expect recognition, admiration, or success in a world which can neither understand nor appreciate the glorious ideal, the heavenly goal, to which they press forward?

But if the *world* knows not these children, thank God *He* knows them; they are life of His life; they are fashioned by His hand; the most insignificant of them is the object of the Father's thoughts, of His redeeming love in Christ Jesus. They are called the 'children of God,' they *are* the children of God. Oh, heavenly love! This is the unspeakable act of mercy, in presence of which St. John bows his head in holy worship; this is the blessed experience of that venerable centenarian!

And the more deeply this blessed thought stirs his soul, the more fervently, earnestly, does he urge, admonish, and plead: 'And now, little children, abide in Him!' For without this abiding in Him, His love will be in vain. Only if we willingly suffer ourselves to abide in Him can His supreme act of love attain the great object of its agonizing endeavour.

Why, even in the world ingratitude is condemned; but what ingratitude is it if we refuse that Divine mercy which was bestowed on us

before we were born, which is enthroned in the heart of Jesus Christ, which came to seek us through inexpressible humiliation, and raised us to the holy dignity of His children? Abide in Him! The branch cannot bear fruit if severed from the tree; only if we abide in Him, who opened for us the way to the Father, Who imparts power to those who believe in Him to become children of God; only if we abide in Him, can we understand, can we realize, these words: 'Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed on us, that we should be called the sons of God.'

II.

And there is yet more; only if we abide in Him will that *Hope* be ours which God has revealed to His children.

For if we are children—and of this we can have no doubt—'it doth not yet appear what we shall be,' *i.e.*, it has not yet been made apparent. The children of God still wander about on earth in alien garb; they are like the prince's son who travels *incognito*. And not that alone. Every day do they receive fresh wounds, the result of their unceasing battle with sin and the world. In their own persons they bear the scars of sin; again and again they sink down, faint through the unending strife. And though the blessed certainty of Divine childhood flashes upon them with renewed brilliance during holy hours, as they kneel at God's altar, and when they bow their

head in earnest prayer, yet, who has not felt tormenting doubts, who has not lived through dark and weary hours, who has not experienced the power of the world's allurements, that sudden slackening of the will in presence of overpowering temptation? Who among us has not suffered acute humiliation in realizing the painful incongruity between the dignity of Divine *childhood* and the weak waywardness of the *child*?

So the Apostle lifts up our eyes to the picture of a beautiful, dazzling hope: 'it doth not yet appear what we shall be.' We dare not seek to portray the form or figure of those in the world of the hereafter. Is it not said, 'it doth *not yet appear*'? But one thing the Apostle proclaims, clearly and without hesitation: 'we know that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is.'

We shall see *Him*! Ah, fellow-Christians, we see Him now; in spirit we see Him as He appears in the holy Gospels, in the writings of His disciples; we see Him—in spirit—among the 'two or three gathered together in His name';¹ we see Him in spirit among us in the Blessed Sacrament. But what we see on this earth—alas! what is it but a mere shadow?—is a reflection in a clouded mirror; we see only the faint glimmer of a far-distant light, as it plays upon the dusky features of weak, sinful man. But if we abide in Him, in His word, in His footsteps, believing, though faint

¹ St. Matt. xviii. 20.

and poor, touching though it be but the hem of His garment, then 'we shall see Him as He is.' Canst thou conceive, though but distantly, what this means? Picture to thyself a man—I know not whether thou hast ever met such an one—whose earnestness, prayerfulness, peace, unselfishness, yes, whose very cheerfulness, forced upon thee the conviction, 'This man is *truly* a Christian!' Think of this man ever at thy side, and thou thyself ever under his watchful care; would not unceasing light and peace flow out from him, would not a holy influence hallow thy life? And yet this man would be but a sinner, like thyself!

And now imagine thy Lord Himself at thy side, encircled with the halo of the Father's glory, and picture thine own heart opened wide to receive the ocean of light and love which are inseparably His. Oh, how thy whole being would yearn to receive within itself His holiness and His love, and the hungering and thirsting heart would be satiated with the stream of Divine love. The vision of this should of itself bring the Apostle's words to fulfilment: 'we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him.'

And how otherwise shall this hope lift up the heart of man, how otherwise can it fill our life—not merely as a passing emotion, but as a lasting power—except in actual obedience to the Apostle's admonition: 'Little children, abide in Him'?

Only the man who finds in another's society

the real happiness of his life will care to continue in his company. Only he who has found sustenance for his inner life in the fellowship of Christ, in His words, and in following His footsteps—that is, only he who ‘*abides in Him,*’ will recognise the sum of his delight in the hope that ‘we shall be like Him.’

And would ye have a certain sign that this is *your* hope too? Then mark this: no fleeting pious mood, no passing wish born of mere emotion, will be a pledge thereof, but only the lasting, enduring, unending, ‘abiding in Him.’

Here is the question upon which all depends: Are our shortcomings, our faults, our sins, a matter of sorrow and shame to us, or do we lightly regard them, and even take secret pleasure in committing them? As long as a man *plays* with sin, this hope has no meaning for him; as long as his sins are a matter of indifference to him, the thought of abiding in Christ cannot move his heart, for Christ is pure, and that which is otherwise cannot abide in Him. When living hope abounds, when man ‘abides in Him,’ then *there* is the power which sanctifies and glorifies life.

III.

‘And everyone that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he (Christ) is pure.’ It is not exactly a command which the Apostle here gives, it is more; it is the necessary consequence

of what has gone before. Whosoever does not experience this inevitable result of abiding in Christ has formed a false hope. If thou art not in earnest in the daily purifying of thyself, then thou hast no right to comfort thyself with the hope just spoken of. Christianity is above all things a religion of holiness—sanctification.

Whoever does not accept and realize a high ideal of morality, because it is too hard, may not look for comfort or promises; and if he, nevertheless, still counts upon these, as many do, he is deceiving himself. 'If ye know that He is righteous, ye know that everyone that doeth righteousness is born of Him,' says St. John.¹ Only he can be a child of God in whom, no matter how feebly and faintly, the traces of the Divine likeness glimmer, in whose outer and inner life is reflected the goodness and purity of God. And no appeal to grace can relieve us of this duty; much rather, the greater the love which uplifted us, the greater is the obligation to cleanse ourselves from all which would inevitably separate us from it.

My brother, thou who wouldst live by the grace of God, who called thee to be His child, thou who desirest to die in the blessed hope of seeing Him as He is, I ask thee in His presence: Dost thou purify thyself, 'even as He is pure'?

That is the simple issue upon which all depends. However many questions may rise to the lips as

¹ 1 John ii. 29.

to what He is like in Whom we hope, how His appearing will be brought about, how our own being will become altered, how our soul will develop in its increase of knowledge—to all these there is no answer. ‘It hath not yet appeared,’ says the Apostle. One thing, however, is absolutely certain: ‘He is pure,’ and we must become pure if we would abide in Him. Only the pure in heart can behold Him.¹ Without sanctification shall no man see the Lord. Every impurity that cleaves to us, every delight in the unclean, carnal world of sin, is of necessity an insurmountable barrier which separates us from Him.

So again let it be asked: Thou that hast this hope, dost thou purify thyself? Or does the thought terrify thee that thou shouldest be wholly pure as He is pure? Art thou affrighted at the thought of what it will cost thee to ‘cut off’ thy sin—*thy* sin to which thy soul clings—ambition, avarice, lust, hate, whatsoever it may be? Dost thou *daily* purify thyself in the presence of Him Who did no sin, ‘Who, when He was reviled, reviled not again, when He suffered, He threatened not’?² Dost thou purify thy lips from lying and slander, whether by word or deed, thine eyes from every lustful look, thine ears from taking a delight in hearing whatever is hateful and uncharitable? Dost thou daily and with penitence examine thy heart, that seat of all uncleanness? Dost thou take for thy help and guide that which is indis-

¹ St. Matt. v. 8.

² 1 St. Pet. ii. 23.

pensable for a thorough purifying of self, namely, the necessary time to see thyself in the infallible mirror of Holy Writ, that thou mayest learn to know thyself, thou who in the whirl of life art become a stranger to thyself? And dost thou pray in holy single-heartedness: 'Make me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me'?¹

Oh, my friends, whatever the answer may be to these questions—and few there are who can reply otherwise than: 'Enter not into judgment with Thy servant'²—this much is certain: such purification can only really take place if we *abide in Him*. Who is it that makes the conscience sensitive? Who holds the world, with its desires and strivings, in holy restraint? Who is it that cleanses the heart from its stain day by day? Who is it that opens wide His sanctuary for us to enter? Who is it that teaches us to pray as we ought? Who is it that spreads His holy table, whence grace and pardon flow? Who is it that vouchsafes to the weak will power to resist the evil? None other than our Saviour, in Whom we must abide, and Who would impress His image upon us, and make us pure as children, so that we may become like our Father.

These thoughts impart new meaning, new significance, to the words of the Apostle: 'And now, little children, abide in Him; that when He shall appear, ye may have confidence, and not be

¹ Ps. li. 10, P.B.V.

² Ps. cxliii. 2, P.B.V.

ashamed before Him at His coming.' And which, of us knows how near the hour of this 'coming' is?

I return, for one moment, to the opening thought of this chapter. Can it really be that those who have forsaken the world, and dedicated their lives to God, should thereby become useless to the world, with its practical ideas and everyday business? Might it not rather be that these are just the firm and strong personalities which this inconstant, unstable world requires? Men who have their conscience clear and are faithful to God, who, fearless of what the world may say, call vulgarity, impurity, and iniquity by their right names—men who, with pure unselfishness, bring into this wrangling, quarrelling world the power of love, and who by so doing are preaching Christianity to those who know nothing of it, and who yet cannot do without it—such men may the God of grace make us all!

Let us walk through the world, watching, as wise servants, for the approach of their Lord; 'that when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming.'

VIII.

‘WHOSOEVER ABIDETH IN HIM SINNETH NOT.’

‘Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law : for sin is the transgression of the law. And ye know that He was manifested to take away our sins ; and in Him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not : whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, neither known Him. Little children, let no man deceive you : he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil ; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin ; for His seed remaineth in him : and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil.’—I JOHN iii. 4-10^a.

DO Christians, in their view of life, in their moral excellence, and in the unselfishness of their love, stand on a higher level than those who are not Christians? Is their ethical standard a more exalted one, not only as compared with that decaying paganism which St. John saw around him in Ephesus, but also in face of the more refined state of society of *to-day*—albeit that society is indebted to Christianity for all that is good in it?

It is well-known that this question is not only actively discussed, but is also frequently answered in the negative. The world delights in pointing

out the shortcomings and weaknesses of which Christians are often guilty; it instances, with ill-concealed glee, cases of gross misdemeanour which from time to time stain the lives of the pious. It is denied that the moral action of a man has anything to do with his belief, or—as it is sometimes expressed—that morality depends upon religion, or religion on morality. And, as a natural consequence, it is also denied that the Christian faith can exercise any moral influence upon those who do not believe in it. We may gladly concede this much, that it is exceedingly difficult to decide a question of this kind upon the uncertain data supplied by isolated cases of misdemeanour. As a matter of fact, however, the question has long since been withdrawn from the domain of argument and doubt. It is answered, and for us who believe the Apostle and his words, it is definitely and finally answered by the pronouncement which forms the central point of our passage: 'Whosoever abideth in Him [*i.e.* Christ] sinneth not.' For surely this is the aim and object of the whole work of Redemption, that Christ may overcome sin in them that are His. The revelation of God's glory and power is consummated in this, that He should behold in His followers sanctified, consecrated men, who are incapable of committing further sin. This is the one really infallible sign on earth of God's children, that they no longer take delight and pleasure in sin; nay,

more, that they—as St. John expresses it immediately after—‘cannot sin,’ because they are ‘born of God.’

But we must not regard the question thus decided as a triumph over the opposing views of adversaries; at any rate, for *us* it is no triumph; on the contrary! For if the Apostle is right in his statement (and he *is* right) that the words ‘he cannot sin’ refer not to this or that ‘Christian,’ but only to him who is truly *in Christ*, then the whole point of his words is directed, not against those who are without, but against *us*. Are *we* these Christians of whom he speaks? Does his definition of a Christian answer to our manner of life? Is that infallible mark of the children of God to be found in us? We quite realize that these are all vital questions which are disagreeable, nay, terrifying, to us; let us not, however, for that reason, shirk them; let us not in our self-examination seek to evade the pain which is inseparable from a straightforward reply to them; let us ask God for the spirit of truth and sincerity in applying to ourselves these words: ‘Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not,’ and let them direct our minds to a threefold train of thought:

I. The fearfulness of sin.

II. The only way whereby the power of sin is broken.

III. The sign whereby we may know whether this power has been broken *in us*.

I.

The Apostle expresses the terrible nature of sin from three distinct points of view. He says first of all: 'Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law'; literally, 'doeth lawlessness;' he revolts, rebels against God's holy command; 'for sin,' he continues, 'is the transgression of the law,' *i.e.*, it is rebellion against the law of God. He that sins severs all connection with the living, holy God. We shall not stop now to consider the question of what sin is; we all have the unequivocal testimony of our conscience as to whether this is pure or impure, whether that is right and godly, or evil and corrupt. But the question is, Do we reckon our sins as wicked? Do we *regard* evil thoughts or the hidden, impure emotions of the heart as sinful, as a rebellion against God and His holy commandments? There is, of course, a consensus of opinion among men that some sins, such as theft and murder, are incontrovertibly wicked, and should be punished; but there are others which are more leniently regarded, and which are no longer branded as wicked or rebellious; at the most, men call them shortcomings or weaknesses, with regard to which everyone is answerable to himself alone and to nobody else. Not so the Apostle. That lie, occurring as it does in business and in everyday life, and which is therefore pardoned by the world, is nevertheless a trans-

gression against God's holy command. This envy, hatred, or malice, which is the normal state of many, and therefore not regarded as wrong, is a declaration of war flung into the face of God's commands. It is a self-contradiction to admire the Sermon on the Mount, and yet by general consent to leave open every backdoor for evading or explaining away its teaching. It is impossible to make distinctions between the commandments; as though men had any right to resent theft and condone adultery, or to regard a lie among friends as scandalous, but permissible in business. It is with our holy God Himself that we have to do, with Him Who gave us the commandments. Whosoever sins lifts up his hand against God. Whether men regard sin as great or small, it is iniquity in the sight of God. Should it even ever come to this, that the whole standard of morality should become lowered, and that gross sin should no longer be condemned, the torpid conscience would not thereby be less guilty in the sight of God! The apostolic word permits of no moral twilight under the shadow of which sin can germinate and scatter abroad its poisonous seeds unchecked. Sin can never change its essential character of rebellion against God -- separation from God!

But if it is a separation from God, it is also a separation from the Saviour, Whom God sent. 'Ye know,' continues the Apostle, 'that He was manifested to take away our sins.' The funda-

mental purpose of His coming was not to teach a new doctrine, not to comfort, not to warn, not to heal. He did all this too, of course, but it was all a means towards the fulfilment of His greatest purpose, His highest aim, in which all else was included, viz., 'to take away our sins.'

But what do we see now? He came to take away our sins, and we indulge and delight in them! He gave His life to rid us of them, and we keep them and love them! Ah, thou that hast pleasure in sin, mark this: thou art separated from Him who came to take away thy sin! Every conscious, deliberate sin severs us, divides us from Christ, makes the thought of His holy image uneasy and disagreeable, makes it impossible to follow Him, impossible to remain in fellowship with Him.

And wouldest thou with thy dark, deliberate sins still call thyself His disciple? Well; Judas, 'one of the twelve,' served sin at the side of the Holy One, and he was a traitor, hastening to perdition.

The Apostle now proceeds a step further. Man never stands alone, is never an isolated being; whatever he does is the outcome of a spiritual relationship; 'he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous.' Christ enters into relationship with him, imparts to him His characteristics; so that he who doeth righteousness actually resembles his Lord; but he that sins, no longer resembles Him. Sin alters

him and becomes a power in him, a power which *he* does not wield, but which is wielded over him. The more he gives himself up to the unbridled desires of the flesh, to the cruel impulse of hate, to the restless passion for enjoyment, to grasping avarice and all-engrossing ambition, the more does he become like him who, as the Apostle says, 'sinneth from the beginning, and whose 'hall-mark' appears on his every action. 'He that committeth sin is of the devil.'

Yes, it is a terrible alternative which is placed before each one of us; who shall say which of the two a man has chosen? We dare judge no man; but every man has these all-embracing questions to face, and to answer: Who art thou, and whither goest thou? Art thou a child of God, or a child of the devil? Truly, the Apostle shows us what a fearful thing sin is!

II.

But just for this reason it must and shall be overcome. And St. John tells us the way thereto: 'Whosoever abideth in Him, sinneth not.' When the sun arises, darkness flees; where Christ is, there can be no sin. Whoever abides in Him becomes light, as He is light. It is the requirement of unconditional, absolute sanctification that the Apostle here points to. Whoever would be a Christian in the true sense of the word must become wholly sanctified. He ceases to

sin; he 'cannot sin' any more because he is 'born of God.'

But this requirement is not made without our being shown the way in which it can be fulfilled. Only he that 'abideth in Him' sinneth not. '*Whosoever abideth in Him.*' Do we understand, dear Christians, this mysterious and profound expression, which our Saviour so often makes use of in His sayings preserved by St. John: 'Abide in Me and I in you'?¹

It is not a matter of mere outward action, not merely of abiding in His Church, in His service, in an external sense. None of us, at least, contemplates any severance of this kind, but what is meant is, *the inner rooting of one's self in the fellowship of His being and spirit.* As the Lord Himself expressed it: 'As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye except ye abide in Me.' By means of this abiding in Him we are transformed into a new being, of which the Apostle speaks immediately after: 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin.' Was it not just because our Saviour was *begotten of the Father*, wholly untouched by sin, that He was able to come as the destroyer of sin, and therefore as our Redeemer? And that same Life, emanating from God, which was in Him, is to enter into us through Him, into all who abide in Him, that they may be born of God

¹ St. John xv. 4.

through Him. For whosoever continues in this new life which Christ offers loses all interest and pleasure in sin; he has gained something better, holier, which invigorates and gladdens him.

Whosoever abides in Christ receives thereby a receptive heart, a sensitive conscience, a painful sensation of unrest and disquietude if he withdraws ever so little from Christ, and a feeling of shame overtakes him if he even approaches the danger-signal, for he knows that thence leads the path to sin. And so sin becomes ever more hateful to him; it assumes the shape of something terrible, and he becomes more and more incapable of committing sin. And lest this should appear incomprehensible to anyone, the Apostle approaches it from the other side: 'Whosoever sinneth,' *i.e.*, Whosoever without trouble or shame can resign himself to sin, and find pleasure in it, 'hath not seen Him, neither known Him.' He may know the word of Christ, he may go to church every Sunday, he may be very orthodox in his belief, but he has not seen God, he has not realized what grace and truth are, he has not experienced sanctification of life; for if he had, the power of the Holy Spirit would have influenced him, and he would have fled from temptation, and would have regarded nothing in heaven or earth as more awful than to act contrary to God's commandments.

Not that any man has the power himself of forming this definite and holy resolution, 'From

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 genuine
 sanctification

henceforward I will abide in Christ.' Wherever this abiding in Christ takes place, it is always by means of the miracle of grace. It is a miracle when any man who is consumed by self-love is released from himself, and learns to deny himself, and to love his brethren; it is a miracle when a man who is chained to lustful passions is freed, and is able to rejoice in the glorious liberty of the children of God: these are miracles which the Redeemer works even at the present day, and by them He reveals His glory. But it is absolutely certain that He Who has appeared to take away sin, and to destroy the works of the devil, effects these miracles only in the hearts of those who will permit it, by accepting in faith the grace which is showered down upon them.

III.

'He that abideth in Him sinneth not.'

Has this miracle been wrought in us? Is sin overcome in us? There is an important point here which it is necessary to dwell upon. The Apostle does not demand sinlessness; if he did, his words would be inapplicable to human beings. However pointed his utterance may be, 'Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not,' it must be remembered that he wrote previously: 'If we say that we have not sinned we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.'¹ He cannot

¹ 1 St. John i. 10.

contradict Himself! As certain as it is that there are children of God on this earth, so certain is it that not one is without sin, not one is yet perfected. Herein lies all the difference: whoever abides in Him does not commit sin, but suffers sin. He is constantly being overcome by sin, but nevertheless he hates sin. He still partakes of the nature of the 'old man,' but nevertheless he repudiates it. The sin is no longer his own; he no longer enjoys it, it is rather something strange, alien to him; he feels there is something incongruous and out of place in his connection with sin; he says: 'I know thee not,' as soon as he comes to himself. Look into thine own experience. Why didst thou fall so lamentably, being overcome by anger and passion? What made thee weak and helpless in the hour of temptation? It was this: thou wast separated from Christ, thou didst lose sight of Him, thou didst leave go His hand, thou wast not 'abiding in Him.' And then, on the other hand, when thou didst conquer, when thou overcamest the temptation of lust, anger, or malice, whence came the power of resistance? From Christ, Whose power abode with thee, because in praying and in fighting thou didst abide in Him.

And now let us put the question to ourselves: Is this *our* attitude towards sin?

Ah, how different must the answers be! We *all* claim some connection with Christ; we all believe that in some respects we are abiding in Him.

And yet how many are still dominated by a secret lust of the flesh, by hatred, by sin, in one or more of its many forms! How many, especially among the younger people, deliberately exempt some part of their inner life from the duty of being sanctified by the light of Jesus Christ. A sad instance of this occurred once in the case of a young man, otherwise devout and God-fearing; in reference to a certain failing he made reply: 'I have no serious intention of obeying God's command!' And how many among us who have grown older, are yet not holier, not less worldly! Though cased in armour, King Ahab had one unguarded spot, the arrow entered there, and he died.¹ And this *one* sin of thine, which thou harbourest, will bring thee death.

And how many others, again, do I see striving, battling, and yet always too weak to continue steadfast; constantly rousing themselves, yet always sinking back again with the sigh: 'Miserable man that I am, who will deliver me?' Yea, more, it is no exaggeration when I say that there are numberless men, who do not by any means consider themselves bad Christians, whose Christianity is in reality nothing more than their 'opinion'—possibly a deeply-cherished one, but only an opinion, not the inspiration of their life, not their victory over the world, least of all the unshaken resolve: 'I will not sin!' Christians, who can plead 'not guilty' to all

¹ 1 Kings xxii. 34, 35.

this? Who has renounced clearly, definitely, unequivocally, all that is evil, not only in the eyes of men, but in the eyes of Him from whom nothing is hid? How many courageously 'cut off' the evil member, regardless of pain, if only they can cease from sin? And yet the children of God have no other alternative. Thy church-going, thy Christian habits, thine honourable position in life—these will not save thee unless thou prove their genuineness by abstaining from sin.

And for this there is but one means—that thou *abide in Him.* Realize with living faith that Christ is thy Redeemer, Who in very truth doth cleanse thee and free thee from past sin and guilt. Realize with living faith that Christ is thy Redeemer, that He loosens the chains of sin, that He gives thee new power daily wherewith to battle against sin, that 'His seed remaineth in thee,' and that in due time the fruit will ripen, and thy victory be proclaimed. Realize with living faith that Christ is thy Redeemer, through Whom thou art made a child of God, and through Whom thou receivest in thine own person the likeness of the Father. Then shalt thou draw ever nearer to the goal, then shall it be said of thee: '*He sinneth not.*' By slow degrees thou wilt come to see that this or that sin is no more a temptation to thee; thou wilt be able to stand in the midst of the battle with unshaken resolution, and say with the great religious hero: 'I

cannot do it, for it is terrible to go against my conscience.¹ Yes, thou wilt be like St. Chrysostom, of whom men said: 'He fears naught on earth but sin'; or like St. Cyprian, who said: 'Let me rather die than knowingly commit a sin.' True, the Divine image in thee will still be marred by many a blemish, and the more sensitive thy conscience, the more apparent will these become to thee, but thy zeal and the sincerity of thy faith will always bear witness within thee that thou art 'born of God'; and though thou must perforce live in a world of sin, nevertheless the fellowship with Christ, in Whom is no sin, will be rooted and grounded in thy heart.

Let me say one further word upon the central thought of our passage: 'Whosoever abideth in Him, sinneth not.' Herein lies the most powerful defence of the Gospel, and the most convincing confirmation of its truth that can be desired, especially in view of the world's attitude towards Christianity at the present time. For it is not a skilful or able defence of our position that will suffice to persuade the world, but a living power from above, viz., the power of love which the Gospel gives. No rich display of wisdom will attract the world—it has wisdom in abundance—but sincerity and self-denying zeal; these it possesses not, and these are the irresistible weapons which can and will conquer it. The world rightly demands a pure and high

¹ Martin Luther.

morality of us, and a horror of all that is vulgar, ignoble, and sinful. We all are bound not only to agree in this, *but to give practical exhibition thereof*, and to say: 'I do not sin, because I abide in Him.' Well do I know that this may be an actual fact in the inner life of a man, and yet outwardly it is not apparent in the same measure; nor do I forget that sometimes the inner lives of two men may be very different, and yet appear outwardly to be not dissimilar. But, nevertheless, this is certain, that where in the depth of the heart the fellowship of Christ is rooted, a power slowly but surely forces itself outward, a power which is irresistible in its influence upon all with whom it comes in contact. And if *we* refuse to use this power, then God will find other instruments to fulfil His will. His kingdom will come, His will shall be done in His good time. But we—think of this—*we*, to whom He has vouchsafed the honour of serving Him, *we*, who are called to fight under His banner, *we*, who rejoice in the liberty of the children of God—we shall perish, if His grace is given to us in vain. As a thorn in our conscience, as a holy admonition to become converted, as a reminder in every hour of temptation, as a warning lest God's grace to us should be in vain, let us treasure up these words in our hearts: 'Whosoever abideth in Him, sinneth not; whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, neither known Him.'

IX.

‘LAYING DOWN OUR LIVES FOR THE BRETHREN.’

‘Whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous. Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world’s goods, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.’—I JOHN iii. 10⁶-18.

IN the preceding paragraph the theme was, ‘He that abideth in Him sinneth not.’ The Apostle maintains that for the true Christian it should be practically impossible to fall into deadly sin. But, in accordance with that sequence of thought peculiar to him, he adds to the foregoing exhortation a further theme, which develops the former subject and leads on to a new one: ‘Whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother.’ The

terms, ‘to do righteousness’ and ‘to love the brethren,’ are to him synonymous. Only where love is, is it possible to ‘do righteousness’; and, *vice versâ*, he who ‘does righteousness’ proves it first by love of the brethren. That species of ‘doing righteousness’ which says: ‘I do my duty, and other people’s doings are not my concern,’ or which says, ‘I stand upon my rights,’ irrespective of the claims of charity, is not of God. For a man to be ‘of God,’ he must first of all show forth his ‘love of the brethren.’

But with this *general* statement the Apostle is not content. It is quite possible that it might be misunderstood. Wherein consists this ‘love of the brethren’? Surely not in that meagre sympathy which has always a tear ready to hand, nor in that emotional talk with which one extols charity! No; love, according to the Apostle, is *action*, self-surrender, self-sacrifice. And its highest act he expresses in those beautiful words, which were to be for his readers a life-precept: ‘We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.’ If it has sometimes been thought that the Epistle of St. John, with its esoteric mysticism, lacks those clear and definite precepts applicable to practical life with which the Pauline Epistles abound, here, surely, the Apostle utterly refutes the charge. To all—to man and woman, to young and old, to high and low—does he make his appeal to lay down the life for the brethren. But he does more; he indicates at the same time whence the

power wherewith this stupendous demand may be fulfilled is to be obtained.

I.

The Apostle shows very clearly the train of thought that leads up to this great demand of 'laying down our lives for the brethren': 'hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us.' A terrible, sombre picture is that of a world without Christ! Rich as that world was in whose midst St. John himself lived, whose voluptuous magnificence he witnessed daily, that Ephesus which was displayed before his wondering eyes, it was nevertheless a world without love! The noblest of the schools of ancient philosophy reckoned among those weaknesses which it was the duty of every philosopher to shake off that of *mercy*. And if any other sign be needed to prove the lovelessness of the world, it may be seen in this—that when Love itself entered into the world, the world nailed It to the cross. But marvellous, inscrutable, past finding out, are the ways of Love. Just that which was the very zenith of diabolical hate became, in God's hands, the means of giving to the world what it so sorely needed. At the foot of the Cross, in the light of that Love which prayed for its enemies and died for its haters, did St. John learn what love truly was; he learned what was its essential characteristic; he saw its unfathomable depth; he realized its overwhelming

power. Christ laid down His life for us: this inspired him with the thought that 'we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.' Yes; if ye would know what love in itself is—how strong, how unselfish, how self-sacrificing—ye must look at the Cross. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'¹ This is the testimony of our Lord Himself. At the foot of the Cross we can 'perceive,' even to-day, what true love is. But this 'perceiving' is not used by the Apostle in the sense merely of mental understanding. This 'perception' is of a practical nature; it has an overwhelming power over those who grasp it—a power which of necessity wholly transforms the life of a man. At the Cross of the Saviour that 'message which ye heard from the beginning' originates, for it was the commencement of something which was essentially new. So great was the power of this message of love, that it could not be checked even by the awful hatred with which it was met by the world. 'Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.' This was all the Apostle could say in face of the world's action. Marvel not, but only go on loving! It is no rare thing that ye experience. This hate is natural to the world; it is the world's characteristic. Or else—he turns their attention to the first instance of hate that history records—'why did Cain murder his brother Abel'? Was it not because 'his own works were

¹ St. John xii. 13.

evil, and his brother's righteous'? Each 'evil work' condemns him, and therefore his brother's works are a standing reproach to him; and the longer he witnesses them, the more unbearable it becomes. What Cain did is repeated at all times—yes, to-day, too. There is this fearful yet ever-recurring mystery in a malicious disposition, that its fiercest hatred is not kindled against an adversary, but against the harmless life—yes, even against that innocent love which by its very silence and patience is a standing condemnation of all malice. And whether the actual deed of murder is committed or not, 'Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer.' And yet, almost involuntarily, we pause at this point of the Apostle's train of thought. Is he really right in what he says? Does he not exaggerate? Where was this 'world' that hated, and whose hatred was to cause no surprise? We can understand how all the persecution and bloodshed which he had witnessed had horrified his soul, and how the memory of them would prompt him to the use of severe language in his epistle. But does not this 'world' exist to-day? Is it not still in our very midst?

Christians, we require no answer from the Apostle to this question.

Certainly, he would allow that the world is more Christian to-day than in his time, but are not Christians more worldly? They have in truth both drawn nearer together. But the Apostle will have nothing to do with this worldly

spirit. He writes in his characteristic way (with which we are already acquainted), apparently so abrupt and unyielding, but calm in his conviction of truth, and ignores all the numberless intervening stages, as though there were no intermediate qualities between love and hate.

He would also allow that this hate has assumed different forms nowadays. It has become, so to say, more civilized; hate no longer burns and tortures others; at the most it commits spiritual murder. Men may live together for a long time without this hate becoming apparent, and then perhaps some special provocation or some sudden outburst of passion reveals it. But it is nevertheless there, whether it be revealed or not.

Then there is another thing to which the Apostle would point were he among us to-day. Christians have become more worldly. This has checked and softened the hatred of the world. One can fully understand why a pliable, submissive Christianity, which hurts nobody, and makes its peace with everybody, should neither provoke the world nor challenge its opposition. In such a Christianity the world would recognise its own mediocrity; in it the world would love *itself*. Perhaps thou hast never experienced the antagonism of the world, because in *thee* the world has loved its own, because it found in thee one who preferred darkness to light. Just because of this self-deception, to which all of us so easily become victims, does the Apostle desire to tear away

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every cloak ; and this is no doubt the reason why he ignores all intermediate steps, and recognises only the *one* or the *other* : either in the world and of the world, and therefore *death*—or in the world and yet apart from the world, and therefore *life* ; either in the darkness of *hate*, or in the bright, pure, and holy atmosphere of *love*. We are ever seeking the half-way, the intermediate steps, the compromises. It appears to us harsh and untrue to say that he who does not love his brother must therefore hate him—for how many there are whom we regard simply with indifference ; or we think it an exaggeration to say that whoever has not wholly appropriated to himself the life that is in Christ Jesus, is therefore abiding in death. But the Apostle does not yield to such arguments. If a man has really recognised in Christ's death the incomprehensible, immeasurable love of God, then there opens out for him an altogether new aim in life ; the very atmosphere of his spiritual surroundings becomes different. He can no longer live unto himself. His ideals, hitherto so worldly, are directed into a different, a divine, channel. 'He is passed from death unto life.' And the visible sign of this change, the primary, infallible, indispensable sign, is that he should love the brethren. 'He that loveth not his brother abideth in death' ; but he who lives in the love of Christ realizes and accepts this truth, that 'we ought also to lay down our lives for the brethren.'

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2. 2. 11.

II.

And in the love of Christ this demand becomes *possible* of fulfilment. Let us first of all try to understand what these words mean, and what they entail. Above all things, let us not seek to weaken their force. They are not the outcome of an exaggerated enthusiasm. Our Lord Himself gave utterance to them,¹ and His Apostle repeats in them the clear, earnest, deep conviction of his long life: 'We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.' Are we able to do so?

When the *Elbe* sank, her faithful captain continued at his post to the very last moment, and sacrificed his life in order that others might be saved. Without doubt there are many true men and true women who are ready at any time to lay down their lives for duty, for their children, or for their country. But when God from time to time asks us if we will do so, for instance, during an epidemic of cholera—ah, yes, miracles of heroic Christian love *are* manifested, but, alas! what cowardice, fear, and selfishness are also displayed! No; to lay down one's life out of sheer love, in calm, purposeful resignation—this can only be done by the man whose life is invigorated and sustained by the life of Christ. It is this alone which prompts those high-souled heroes to go forth as missionaries into countries whose climate—like that of the Gold Coast—is simply deadly; it was this irresistible power of love

¹ St. John xv. 13.

which made John Coleridge Pattenson leave his fortune, his fame, his father and sister, in England, and exile himself amongst the most savage of savage races, and lay down his life for his brethren—yes, there amidst those blood-stained islands of Melanesia he found the martyr's crown!

But the Apostle makes this demand of *all* of us. In truth, the Saviour had laid down His life for the brethren before the crowning tragedy of the Cross. He Himself says: 'The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.'¹ In this ministering, consuming, self-sacrificing love He devoted day by day His time, His power, His last drop of blood, yea, His life, to the brethren. In this example of Christ, in this daily self-denying love, lies the duty which is imposed upon us all, and it is the school wherein we prepare for that greatest and noblest deed that man can accomplish—the laying down of his life for his brethren.

There are some professions in life in which this has to be contemplated almost daily; for example, those of the doctor, the nurse, and the deaconess. There are others wherein apparently nothing is so improbable as that a man would be called upon to lay down his life for others—for example, that of the merchant who sits in his office all day, or that of the man who is always busy in the workshop. But no one is exempt from the duty. This call to lay down one's

¹ St. Mark x. 45.

life for others in self-denying love is not one to be regarded as apart from our ordinary profession, but one which is to be the light and guide of our whole life—of our business life as well as of our social life, of our home life as well as of our public life; it is to be all-predominating in our work as well as in our leisure. He who does not make this his aim is a poor, pitiable man, even though he possesses all that the world calls wealth. He who in his ministering love has the consciousness of doing some good on earth, by sowing the seed of love in others, is rich, though he live in penury. Unselfish love in the service of our brethren makes life truly precious, whereas that miserable thirst for selfish enjoyment is not worth the effort expended upon it. Look at the lives of many men, look at your own lives. Oh, how many good, respectable people, irreproachable in their behaviour, would be horror-struck if they were required to say how many brethren they had served in genuine unselfish love! Suffer yourselves to be stirred, to be urged, to the practice of this love.

You younger ones, who are so ready to be inspired with high ideals, see, here is the greatest, the noblest: to dedicate your lives *not* to the selfish service of your own persons, but to devote them in willing, self-sacrificing love to the service of your brethren.

But if this unselfish, ministering love is to take that of Christ as a pattern, then let us not forget

that we must be prepared to resign life itself. For this Saviour, with His burning heart and consuming zeal, with His inexhaustible patience, with His sympathy that knows the sinner's need as though it were His own, that feels the pain of the sufferer as though He suffered it Himself—this Saviour knows of none of those reservations which we so often make. He has no anxious cares about Himself, as we have. He never asks whether His time, His convenience, or His health, will suffer. When He gave His life a ransom for many, He gave Himself wholly; and with such free, undivided, joyous love do thou commence to work, dear Christ-follower, in thy immediate circle. Be thou a burning and a shining light, and see to it that thou *give* light, and that thy light be not dimmed. Look well, that thou mayst see where to exercise thy love; that thou mayst lighten the sunless life, and comfort the sorrow-stricken, and help bear the heavy burdens of others, and guide aright the straying. And hanker not after the extraordinary; be content with the seemingly small things in life. If thou art not called upon to lay down thy life, then sacrifice something of thy convenience, something of thy comfort. Suffer none in thy house to be without the sunbeam of thy kindness; let each know that thou lovest him. Then shalt thou learn that in resigning thy person thou gainest thyself, that in laying down thy life thou becomest truly living. Thy life will grow ever richer, freer

and happier, because love will more and more strengthen the conviction that 'thou art passed from death unto life,' and every new experience of such life increases thy desire to dedicate thy life to Him who gave His life for thee, and in His love it will become ever easier, grander, and more glorious to thee to lay down thy life for thy brethren.

Then, if we owe our brethren the greatest that we have, how much more that which is less! 'Whoso hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?' The Apostle mentions here one of those outward signs of love which are, of course, natural if the heart is full of Christ's example. At the same time it requires special mention, because the heart clings to this world's goods with special affection, and because the right exercise of this sympathetic love is the more difficult on account of our multifarious and complex duties.

There is no question here of a distribution of our goods; that is impracticable; even those early Christians who had all things in common very soon found that this would not answer, and the idea was given up; it is not the possession of goods which is deprecated. In spite of all that may be said, Solomon's dictum will probably hold good to the end of the world: 'The rich and the poor meet together; the Lord is the maker of

them all.'¹ But that the heart should be touched at the sight of want, this St. John insists upon. For want is not of the natural order, but it is the consequence of human sin; in the divine counsels it becomes a holy call to mercy, the means whereby God touches our hearts and arouses in us our slumbering love. Hence the significance of those words: 'Whoso hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother hath need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?'

Let thy heart be moved at the sight of all poverty and need with which thou comest in contact. Gather all want into the 'hospital of thy heart' as a mediæval mystic expressed it. Let the sunshine of love burst forth from thy heart upon all who have need of it. It is by this means that that atmosphere of mercy is generated which is the characteristic of Christianity, that holy sympathy which feels for all who suffer, that gentle and sweet disposition which foregoes its own in order that it may give to those who need.

It is true that our duty in this respect is so many-sided and complex that it is impossible to lay down fixed rules. But where love is, rules may be dispensed with; where love is wanting, rules will be of no avail. It must always be a matter of reproach to the well-to-do when they remember how far more generous and neighbourly the poor

¹ Prov. xxii. 2.

are among themselves than they are; the widow's mite is not a thing of the past. He who has suffered poverty is often more eager than he who lives in the lap of luxury to help those who are in adversity. Let us bear this in mind: we must learn to give according to our ability; we must learn to curtail our requirements, in order that we may be enabled to give. Let us learn to give according to the dictates of love. With positive anxiety does the Apostle admonish us: 'My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.'

Of course he would not exclude that holy, comforting power which a kind word wields, and which oftentimes inspires more courage and confidence than an accompanying gift; but he points to the contrast between falsehood and truth, between sham and reality.

Genuine love is only to be found where genuine truth is; 'though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal,'¹ says St. Paul, and at the conclusion of that wonderful chapter he reckons above faith and hope the love that never ceases. He points us to the same ideal as St. John does. This love in all its purity and perfection is to be seen in Him who laid down His life for us, and only in the power of His love can we learn to 'lay down *our* lives for the brethren.'

¹ 1 Cor. xiii. 1.

X.

'GOD IS GREATER THAN OUR HEART.'

'And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things which are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment. That we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as He gave us commandment. And he that keepeth His commandments dwelleth in Him, and He in him. And hereby we know that He abideth in us, by the Spirit which He hath given us.'—I JOHN iii. 19-24.

PLAIN and simple as these words sound, they contain thoughts which are stupendous. profound. In writing on the Gospel of St. John, Matthias Claudius says: 'There is much of what I read therein which I do not understand, but often I seem to see dimly, as in the distance, what St. John meant.' That is true too of his epistle, and of this passage before us. Immediately after his great sermon on love of the brethren, he leads us to the confessional, in order that each may examine himself, and see whether his Christian belief as well as his brotherly love are genuine and sincere. And from the accusa-

tions of our conscience he leads us on to the glorious heights of Divine mercy, and shows to us the firm rock of our Salvation, and we hear those loving words of comfort—words which form the kernel of the verses before us: ‘God is greater than our heart!’

I.

‘God is greater than our heart.’ From the context it will be seen that the Apostle says this by way of comfort. He points to the unfathomable mercy of God. On Him rests the foundation of our salvation. He is our refuge—our unfailing refuge. Because God is greater, richer, wider than our heart, which is poor and narrow, therefore we are able in His presence to calm, to soothe our heart, *i.e.*, to quiet it when it condemns us, when it witnesses against us. The Apostle leads us again into the world of inner experience. In His presence we may calm our heart. Before Him, before His very face, there is that silent self-examination which every man undergoes when once his heart has been roused to accuse—to condemn him. When the Apostle speaks of the heart, he does not differentiate so minutely as we are now accustomed to do between the separate workings of the soul. He conceives of the *inner man* as one whole, as that other better *ego*, which every man has within him—the voice to which we listen as often as we examine ourselves. And when he speaks of a *heart* which

accuses and condemns, he clearly intends us to understand thereby, the voice of conscience—the voice which declares to us the verdict which that better *ego* prompts. He bids us listen to its accusation, and see whether we are in the spiritual condition that our better self demands. But for this he requires something more even than those pricks of conscience which an earnest-minded man feels in consequence of daily shortcomings. There is a deeper, more silent, condemnation which becomes audible to the sensitive, well-practised heart; it is that which takes place when conscience summons before her holy tribunal that inner, deep, mysterious personality in man which is so often ignored, and which some men scarcely ever become conscious of. And to this hidden, spiritual being the solemn question is put, whether it is 'of the truth.'

'Truth' is the harmony between our outward action and our inner being. Wherever this concord is real, there is truth; this is the infallible sign that we are 'in the truth'; wherever it is absent, there is untruth; and when the two are consciously and wilfully made to disagree, then a *living lie* is the result.

There can be no truth where our outward attitude towards men is a contradiction of our inner feelings, or where our profession before the world differs from the real state of our heart in the sight of God; where this is the case, be sure that the

path of falsehood has been entered upon, and the path of truth has been forsaken.

The Apostle’s expression, to be ‘of the truth,’¹ is intended to describe that permanent state of spiritual truth in which a man’s whole being is unalterably fixed. But to be convinced that this state has been really reached is intensely difficult, because the heart is so dishonest, and because we are so apt to deceive ourselves. Therefore the Apostle offers an unmistakable sign whereby to know without any doubt whether we may reckon ourselves as being really ‘of the truth.’ Whether we are ‘of the truth’ is proved, not by feelings, emotions or resolutions, which are all fallible criteria, but hereby, that ‘we should love the brethren.’ For love—unselfish, self-denying love—is in its nature pure and true, and precludes all possibility of fraud or self-deception. Prove the reality of thy love by acts of love among thy brethren. Let this question of thy love for others be one of all-embracing solemnity. God is not a God of falsehood, but of truth; and whoever would enter into His presence must cast away every cloke of self-deception wherewith he has sought to deceive himself. Many a man that is a sinner will be received by his merciful God, but no man shall stand in His sight who is insincere or lacking in inward truth.

And now let us follow the Apostle as he directs

¹ Cf. our Lord’s words to Pilate, ‘Every one that is *of the truth* heareth My voice.’—St. John xviii. 37.

our thoughts into a different channel. He knows that there are but very few who are altogether free from hypocrisy. Even though thou art assured that thou art a disciple of the Lord, Who laid down His life for the brethren, still how much insincerity there is in thee! How many excuses for thy faults dost thou make! How much vanity and self-glorification is in thy life! Are we not all afraid of seeing ourselves as God sees us; of having our secret sins brought to the light of day; of probing the real value of our would-be virtues? Or, dear Christians, have you never experienced those hours of agonizing self-accusation, that restless pricking of the conscience which you have outraged, the pain at observing the irreconcilable strife between your better self and your lower nature? Do you know nothing of those awful moments wherein our 'old man' gets the upper hand, and the whole of our religion appears to have been a sham—moments during which we have been tempted to doubt the very existence of truth, which, after all, has exercised so little power over us? It is a fact that the best men undergo this experience (just as St. Paul did¹), for their consciences become more dictatorial and imperious the nearer they are brought to God. But if this is so, where is the certainty of grace, the peace of reconciliation, which we believed was ours? How shall we find firm ground again after having been tossed about by such tempestuous

¹ Rom. vii. 14-25.

waves of doubt and uncertainty? St. John shows us the way in these words: ‘God is greater than our heart.’ If we are of the truth, *i.e.*, if we are fully resolved to follow in the steps of Jesus Christ as upright, genuine disciples, then we shall learn by a blessed experience that He forgives and forgets, that He ‘imputes not’¹ sin. Our heart may rightly accuse and condemn us, but we may nevertheless look to our righteous Advocate, Christ. Though we dare not cease to condemn ourselves, yet He will not condemn us nor cast us away. Not that the cause of His grace and mercy is to be found in us—our salvation is through Christ, and through Him alone. But those that are His have this Divine comfort, ‘God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.’ He knows not only thy sins, thy backslidings, thy hours of despair, fear, and contrition, but He knows also the depths of thy heart, thy earnest yearning for the good, and He can say to thee, in spite of all: ‘I know that thou lovest Me!’ In the certainty of such grace, which is greater than we can understand, we may calm our hearts. Luther has beautifully said: ‘If our conscience makes us afraid, God is greater than our heart. Conscience is but a single drop, but a reconciled God is an ocean of comfort!’ Even the just judgment of conscience is silenced before the greatness of God’s mercy; the sentence it gives is shorn of all severity in the face of God’s forgiving love.

¹ Rom. v. 13.

II.

And when this deep wound of conscience has been healed, then the heart is lifted up to God with inexpressible joy. 'Beloved, if our heart condemn us not,' because it is quieted by the certainty of Divine grace, 'then have we confidence towards God.'

As long as our conscience within us is at enmity with ourselves, our natural feeling towards God, Who is holy, is one of fear, or at least one of discomfort. But where grace rules—grace which is greater than our heart—there is generated a very different feeling towards God; indeed, an altogether new relationship towards Him is established. If we are 'of the truth,' then, in spite of the weakness of the flesh and in spite of our doubts, we can flee to Him, and look up joyfully into His face, as children to their father; for the highest privilege of Divine childhood, the most blessed privilege vouchsafed to Christians, is this: that they have the power to pray, and not only to pray, but to pray with the certainty of receiving an answer to their prayers. 'Whatsoever we ask we receive of Him,' or, as the Apostle says a little later on in his Epistle, 'And this is the confidence that we have in him that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us.'¹

A twofold assumption is attached to the prayer that is to be answered. Firstly, it is the fruit

¹ 1 John v. 14.

only of a right attitude to God, i.e., that of the child to its father; this condition is indispensable if we desire our prayers to be granted. Most men forget this, and think that praying means simply asking, or even demanding, just what they would like, or what the need of the moment seems to require; and the more vehemently the request is urged, the more devout and earnest do they imagine their prayer to be, as though it were the duty of God to grant, as soon as ever possible, the requirements of man! And then when the desired fulfilment is not forthcoming, they immediately think that praying is of no use. Ah, dear Christians, do you suppose that the Apostle dignifies *this* with the name of prayer? On the other hand, no prayer which rises up to the living God, and is the outcome of genuine faith, is rejected. But this can only be true of the children of God, whose heart is full of joy and confidence through the grace of their Father. And this confidence is not shown by the child demanding this or that, or by claiming its right to speak to the Father; first let the child give thanks for what it has received; let it pour out to Him its terror of the devil’s onslaughts; let it calm its heart in the certainty of God’s grace, whenever sin gains the upper hand—then, prayer will be no demand, no last resource because everything else has failed, but a blessed encouragement, an indispensable need, whereby the soul gains strength from God whenever the noise and

worry and anxiety of the world overcomes it. Thou mayest not lie down to rest before thy prayer has gone up to God in thanksgiving for the mercies of the past day, in supplication that all thy sins and shortcomings may be forgiven for Christ's sake. Thou mayest not enter upon the duties and anxieties of another day without consecrating thyself to thy work through intercourse with God, through His Holy Spirit. All unseemly demanding will then cease of its own accord, and yet thou wilt be certain that thy prayer is not in vain, that 'whatsoever we ask we receive of Him.'

But then there is another side to this. Every genuine prayer is accompanied, as the Apostle says, by a keeping of His commandments: 'Whatsoever we ask we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things which are pleasing in His sight.' He who prays without pleasing God in his life will never receive an answer to his prayer; indeed, it is no prayer that he offers up, but a sham, a counterfeit. If there is any answer to the prayer of him who harbours hate, who is a liar or a fornicator, or whose heart is estranged from God, it will be in the form of judgment. 'God cannot minister unto us unless we serve Him; He cannot grant our desires unless we do His will,' says a commentator on this verse.

All the demands which God makes upon us are summed up in these words: 'That we should

believe on the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, as He gave us commandment.’

The man who believes in the name of Jesus, *i.e.*, walks in His footsteps, and is guided by His word and example, *is* keeping the commandments of God. There is no commandment which is not included in a faithful following of Jesus ; in doing this, a man is also fulfilling the command of loving the brethren, for he cannot become like Jesus unless he follows Him in the love which He commanded. If a man prays, believing in Jesus, and doing as He did, He will be constantly receiving the answer to his prayers ; he prays always in the name of Jesus, and therefore his prayers will be heard ; the spirit of power, of courage, of comfort, and of patience, will never be wanting to him in his conflict with the world, in the duties of his calling, and in the cares of life.

He will learn, it is true, that there is another sense in which ‘God is greater than our heart,’ for He answers our prayers according to His wisdom, not according to our ignorance. He does not always follow the path which we point out in our prayers, but He always directs us in the right way, in order that we may fulfil His will, and gain new confidence in Him. We shall only learn this by experience, and by persevering in prayer. There are times of slackness, of barrenness, and of faintness, in the life of every Christian,

but perseverance in prayer, even at such times, leads anew to the Fountain-head, where we can drink, and gain fresh strength.

III.

The more rooted the conviction that God, Who is greater than our heart, hears the prayers of His children, the more will this certainty make our life holy, the more shall we be enabled to abide in Him as He abides in us. The Apostle expresses this in the last verse of the passage before us, and leads us thereby to a further thought: 'And he that keepeth His commandments dwelleth in Him'; and the sign that God is dwelling in us, he thus describes: 'And hereby we know that He abideth in us by the Spirit which He hath given us.'

That he has the Spirit of God is to the Apostle a fact as certain as the other facts of his inner life, which he has already mentioned in his epistle, viz., that he has passed from death unto life, and that he has come from darkness into light. He heard from the lips of his Master that 'if a man love Me he will keep My words; and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him and make Our abode with him.'¹ This became realized in him through the Spirit which he had received. And whatever our Lord said concerning the Holy Spirit during those memorable hours, all came true. The Spirit reminded

¹ St. John xiv. 23.

St. John of the words of Jesus; the Spirit made the image of Christ in St. John real; the Spirit led him into all truth. And this He did, not to the Apostle alone; for the Spirit Whom the ascended Lord sent is the pledge of His union with His people at all times—the pledge of His union with thee and with me. Every Easter festival, which bears witness to the risen Lord; every Whit-Sunday, which commemorates the out-pouring of the Spirit; every service, every celebration of the Holy Communion, at which, according to His own word, our Lord is present in His Holy Spirit, reveals Him anew to His followers, and helps them towards their great aim, that they may abide in God, and He in them. This is a heavenly, and therefore invisible, work. We cannot see the action of the Spirit with our eyes; we cannot follow Him in His mysterious workings in the depths of human hearts; ‘the wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit.’¹ But we see the *results* of His working. We recognise His presence in the power of a spiritual life.

In the earnestness with which we hate sin, in the faithfulness with which we work out our own salvation, in the strength whereby we overcome our evil self, is the presence of the Spirit manifested. What the Apostle spoke of as conditions

¹ St. John iii. 8.

of answer to prayer, namely, to believe on the name of the Son of God, and to love one another—these are, as we now see, the gifts and actions of the Holy Spirit.

The new element into which we are transported by means of the entrance of the Spirit into our heart is one in which we are to abide continually. He blesses us beyond all human conception; He comforts us and strengthens us in ways which are past our comprehension. It happens often that 'we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.'¹ We stand often in the furnace of temptation; but more dreadful still than that is the thought of 'vexing the Holy Spirit of God, whereby we are sealed unto the day of redemption.'²

Before concluding, let me put the question: Dost thou exhibit this sign, that thou art in God and God in thee? Hast thou received the Spirit of God? When St. Paul put this question to some of the disciples in Ephesus, he received as answer: 'We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost'³ We do not hear of any such answer now; we know that there is a Holy Ghost; we have felt His hand guiding us, we have experienced His power working in us. But that He should *abide* in us—this is the all-important, indispensable need of our spiritual

¹ Rom. viii. 26.

² Eph. iv. 30.

³ Acts xix. 2.

life. Alas! we may deceive ourselves with the question as to whether we are guided by the Spirit of God or by the spirit of the world; but God is greater than our heart, and knows us better than we know ourselves, and purifies us from all self-deception.

‘He that keepeth His commandments dwelleth in Him and He in him.’ The spirit which weakens our desire to fulfil the commandments of God, and which makes us indulgent towards ourselves, is not of God. The keeping of God’s Commandments is the real and visible sign that His Spirit is dwelling in us.

May He, Who is greater than our heart, make us true and pure and earnest in showing to the world the infallible proof of His indwelling Spirit; only hereby can we ‘know that we are of the truth’; only hereby can we ‘assure our hearts before Him.’

XI.

PROVE THE SPIRITS.

‘Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try¹ the spirits whether they are of God : because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God : Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God : and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God : and this is the spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come ; and even now already is it in the world. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them : because greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world : therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God : he that knoweth God heareth us ; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.’—I JOHN iv. 1-6.

FOR the second time in this Epistle St. John draws attention to false teachers. These false teachers were causing doubt and confusion among believers, for which cause the warning word goes forth : ‘Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God.’ It is well to realize thoroughly the need of this warning.

The Apostle was writing, as we know, at the very end of the first century. The age was one during which changes of the most diverse character were taking place. The leaven of the king-

¹ R.V. ‘prove.’

dom of God was beginning to manifest its hidden power. But the more thoroughly this leaven permeated the spirits of men, the more diverse and manifold did the forms become under which it was sought to understand the new teaching, and to reconcile the old with the new. Hence there arose between the new faith and the wisdom both of Judaism and Hellenism, transition-forms, a mixture of both, with the inevitable result that strange and fantastic doctrines took the place of the pure teaching of the Gospel.

Just as St. Paul had especially to combat the false teaching occasioned by the wrenching asunder of Christianity from Judaism, so St. John, the last Apostle, was occupied in refuting the errors which had their origin in mixing up Christianity with Paganism.

The immediate danger for his own circle of converts may have been overcome, for he writes in verse 4: 'Ye have overcome them.' But the success which these false teachers had had in the world—'the world heareth them'—occasioned the fear that they might, on account of the glamour attaching to them through the applause of the world, gain an influence over unstable Christians, and lead them astray too. It is quite possible that this was the original cause which prompted St. John to pen his Epistle. In any case, the words of this verse were called forth in view of the perilous position of immature Christians, occasioned by the teaching of these

'false prophets': 'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.'

But intellectual movements occur in every age. If one follows the history of the development of the human mind, it will be noticed that old-world theories occur again and again, only in different guise. The old adversaries of the Gospel are constantly rising up again, and always in some new garb. And this is more especially the case when a new epoch is establishing itself upon the ruins of a decaying one, or when new light has been thrown upon the Gospel-pages through the persevering zeal of scholars, or, once more, when the foundations of the Christian faith are again revealed to men after a period of spiritual lethargy, and Christianity has to vindicate afresh its position in the face of unbelief. What happened during that century which witnessed the death-struggle between heathenism and Christianity, occurred again during the period of the Reformation. And it is happening again now in our own time, which in some respects resembles that of the Reformation. Never before have the views on either side been urged with more vehemence than at the present time, nor have the issues involved ever before been so vast and far-reaching. And between the two extremes on either side numberless intermediate positions have been taken up.

The various theories put forward as to how the ideal of human happiness may be attained are all supported by that burning zeal and irrational optimism which is common to enthusiasts.

Whole bodies of our people, but also individuals, live in a novel mental atmosphere, and breathe in the air thereof, and yet numbers of them have not the slightest idea where the new teaching comes from, or even what it really teaches, still less what it may ultimately lead to.

If in St. John's day the warning, 'Believe not every spirit,' was needed, much more is it needed to-day. If ever the caution, 'Try the spirits, whether they be of God,' was necessary, most emphatically is it so at the present time.

Whom shall we follow? Who will be a trustworthy leader in this intricate maze of ideas and opinions? Above all, where is the boundary-line for a Christian? These are burning questions for many men to-day. We are, indeed, all so tinged with the doubts and errors of our time, that none of us can afford to forego this 'trying' or 'proving' of the spirits which the Apostle urges upon us.

I.

'Believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they be of God.' St. John is quite clear as to the way in which this can be ascertained: 'Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the

flesh is of God, and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God.'

I can fully understand that some people should at first sight be somewhat disappointed at the 'test' here given by the Apostle: that they should regard it as unsuited, unpractical, perhaps even wholly useless, in the present mental and social condition of the world. They would have had no difficulty in understanding him if he had said that the real test of whether a doctrine is of God is to be seen in its moral excellence, or in its agreement with the teaching of the Divine Word of God. But that the proof should consist in the confession that 'Jesus Christ is come in the flesh,' this is incomprehensible to many.

We have already more than once pointed out that St. John, whose thoughts are often so exalted as to appear lost in the heights of eternity, is nevertheless intensely practical when it is a question of the historical realities of the faith. He commenced his Epistle with a cry of joy at having been permitted to see and touch Him Who had become flesh. He now emphasizes this truth, and teaches again that this Incarnate Jesus is the Christ, the Saviour of mankind. And there was a special reason for doing this. Unlike believers of to-day, many at that time considered that the reality of our Saviour's *human existence* was a matter of unimportance, even of indifference. In their childish and fantastic 'wisdom' they had

conceived of Christ as having assumed human form and suffered death only in *appearance*, not in reality.¹ And in opposition to the tearing asunder of the divinity and humanity of our Lord which this teaching involved, and which turned the living personality of Jesus Christ into an unreal, 'impassive phantom,' the Apostle lays all possible stress upon the human reality of the Son of God, 'who is come in the flesh.'

Men's methods of thought alter. The opposing views which are now struggling for mastery are, it is true, different from what they were in St. John's time; but the manner in which St. John would have us 'prove the spirits' has lost nothing of its significance; now as then it directs us just along the lines that are needed. The Incarnation of the Son of God was one of the great questions of those times. It forms to-day too the line of demarcation between the 'spirits,' and that in an even greater degree than formerly. The most burning and all-embracing problem of the day is the question concerning the existence of the supernatural. Christianity, which claims to be supernatural, and tells of how the redeeming God became a personality in the history of humanity, demands not only toleration, but also that it

¹ This was the doctrine of the 'Docetæ,' and was accepted by almost all the Gnostic sects. Milman ('History of Christianity,' vol. ii., p. 61) explains their doctrine in these words: 'The whole union with the material human form was an illusion upon the senses of men; it was but an *apparent* human being, an impassive phantom, which *seemed* to undergo all the insults and the agony of the Cross.'—*Trans.*

should be acknowledged as a living *fact*, as a historical truth. He who denies this deprives Christianity of all reality; he is, whether he knows it or not, in the Apostle's words, 'the spirit of Antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.'

This condemnation will not sound strange to those who definitely refuse the Gospel. Alas! there are many such, for nowadays men have gone far beyond the limits which St. John was contemplating. With too many it is not a question as to how far Christian teaching can be stretched, but one of repudiating Christianity altogether. To the question: 'Are ye still Christians?' the answer has been 'No!' and in place of religion they have substituted art, education or culture, allowing, forsooth! that Christianity has done much for the furtherance of each. Instead of worshipping Christ, men set up the worship of genius, and offer the 'morality' of their teaching as proof of its excellence. But he who would strike out of the world's history the holy figure of Christ will soon come to regard morality merely as a very noble idea, and as a natural consequence he will look upon conscience as a thing not to be relied upon.

But then, on the other hand, there are not wanting numberless theories, which would fain partake of the Gospel spirit; for how often really noble, truth-seeking men try to mediate between

culture and Christianity, between acknowledging God, Whom they cannot bring themselves to deny, and their respect for a supposed 'intellectualism!' Thus, the tie between them and Christ consists of a kind of pious remembrance of Him; but the *Redeemer* who came in the flesh is no more to them than this.

Or, once more, men comfort themselves with the thought that, after all, it does not really matter whether Christ ever lived on earth, or how He lived. It was not, say they, what He did, not His death and resurrection which redeemed the world, but the *words* which He spoke, the thoughts which He expressed, the Spirit that went out from Him; and this Spirit which continued His work made His personality unnecessary; in a word, it was an *idealized* Christ who redeemed the world! But what have these men done? They have, like those false teachers in St. John's day, made Christ only an appearance, a nebulous form without historical reality; for them there is no Redeemer, no redemption, or if there is any redemption it is the transformation of their thoughts regarding God, whereby they become 'spiritualized' and made moral. But this idea of redemption is not an *alteration of our relationship to God*; it is no more a holy act of love on the part of our God, Who sent His Only-begotten into the world to reconcile us to Him. I said above that agreement with the Word of God might well be a proof of the Divine origin of a

doctrine. Test *this* doctrine by the standard of the Evangelists, and you will see that St. John is right when he says: 'He that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God.'

And then the aged Apostle, noting as he does the signs of a changing and portentous time, admonishes with truly parental anxiety. 'Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits'—whether these spirits are of God, whether they are leading thee to God, whether thy acquaintances, thy study, thy instruction, are all bringing thee nearer to God, drawing thee closer to thy Saviour. These are surely paramount questions, upon which everything depends. There are many false prophets among us. Their poisonous seed is scattered abroad in word, in writing, in periodicals, in books, with ominous pertinacity. It is no use denying it: numbers of our people, educated as well as uneducated, are the victims of doubt and scepticism. Yes, we are all affected by the evil influences of the day, often unbeknown to ourselves.

Christians, let us act in accordance with the words of St. John; let it be with a holy fear for our souls' welfare; let it be with anxious zeal for the purity of our belief that we 'prove the spirits, whether they be of God.' For he that 'confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God.'

II.

What is to be the result of the 'proving of the spirits' as regards ourselves? As answer the Apostle offers us three thoughts for consideration.

First, this 'proving' is not to terrify us, but it is to inspire us with a courageous faith. 'Little children,' he says to those who suffer themselves to be guided by him, 'ye are of God.' If ye are resolved to be faithful to God, if (in the words of Joachim Neander) 'ye would rather hope unto death than perish in unbelief,' then it is absolutely certain that 'ye have overcome them,' *i.e.*, the spirits of antichrist. Ye 'have' done so, says the Apostle, and thereby refers to an accomplished fact. They have won this victory not only because these false teachers have been driven from the flock of Christ, and that a dangerous crisis has in consequence been overcome; no, but also because they have proved themselves to be in the normal state in which Christians ought to be, *viz.*, the state of *continuous* watchfulness against danger, and therefore of victory over all evil. That which is godly must always overcome that which is ungodly. Even though those who are against us are more than those who are for us, this can have no effect upon the truth, for here majorities are of no avail. No matter how small the handful of the faithful may be—why, even if I, a believer, born of God, stood alone in a world of opposition and

hate—*they* would fall, and *I* should conquer. The world is already overcome; He Who is in me is greater than he that is in the world. ‘Be of good cheer,’ said our Lord, ‘I have overcome the world.’¹

Christians, we know the times; we know how keenly we sometimes feel our solitariness as believers; we know how galling the gibes of the scoffers are, and how aggravating the polite silence of the wise is; these are often a sore trial to our faith, weak as that is at the best of times. But these onslaughts are the very things which teach us to be more than ever dependent upon our God. Open out, at such times, the soul to the influence of the Holy Spirit. Come prayerfully in the name of Jesus Christ to the throne of grace, then shall ye learn ever anew that ‘greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.’

For, in the second place, this ‘proving’ of the spirits to which the Apostle urges us is intended to be the explanation of an incomprehensible fact. For incomprehensible it indeed appears to be that even after eighteen centuries of Christianity the spirit of antichrist should still be in the world, that the battle should still be raging; nay, more, that to the superficial observer victory should seem almost everywhere to be with the spirit of antichrist. But St. John would have us remember that ‘he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us,’ and that ‘they are

¹ St. John xvi. 33.

of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them.'

In the great spiritual battle which is being waged in the world, the victory remains with God; but as regards the struggle which is taking place in each individual, it is necessary that man should do *his* part if he expects and desires victory. 'Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice,'¹ said our Lord. If a man lacks the sense of truth, he hears the word but derives no power therefrom; it does not overmaster him and convert him. Only 'he that knoweth God heareth us,' *i.e.*, when we speak concerning the truth. For we can only 'know' if we are avowedly searching for the truth. God speaks to each one of us hundreds of times. He does what He can, but He *forces* no man to open his heart to the spirit of truth, or to close it to the spirit of error. If a man cares not to seek holiness and salvation, God lets him go to the world and seek happiness there!

And now, let us ask ourselves: What is it that mostly hinders us from acknowledging Christ? I do not deny that there are faithful, earnest men for whom God Himself makes the way to belief hard, men who have to go through terrible conflicts and doubts before they accept the faith in its entirety. I am not speaking of such now. But look at most men: is it not in the vast majority of cases a want of earnestness that keeps

¹ St. John xviii. 37.

them from the truth? In order to feel the need of a Saviour, I must realize that sin is damaging my soul; and for this, deep humility and genuine contrition are indispensable. Every one desires to become a good man; but to become a holy man, a self-denying man, a man whose every thought is subject to the purifying correction of the Holy Spirit of God—that is asking too much, that is more solemn than we care about; we love the world too much for that.

It is not only the wicked, but also the so-called 'good' people—like that rich young man whom our Lord looked upon and loved¹—that turn their backs upon their Saviour and attend to the world. They will not directly oppose religion, they retain a show of it, perhaps, as a kind of ornament in their lives; but a *personal* relationship with their God—for this they have no sort of inclination. They are 'not of God,' but 'of the world.' This is what St. John calls not the 'spirit of truth,' but the 'spirit of error.'

Therefore, in the third place, this 'proving of the spirits' is to result in our taking a solemn decision. We are to decide what kind of a spirit is to abide in us.

Once more let us contemplate the tremendous contrasts which the Apostle places before us; the Spirit of God on the one hand, the spirit of anti-christ on the other—the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. Many as may be the intermediate

¹ St. Mark x. 17-22.

stages between each of these, we are finally brought face to face with the definite alternative: *this* or *that*—*one* or the *other*—Christ or anti-christ.

Beloved Christians, on which side do we stand? Whither leads the innermost bent of our spirit—to God or to the world? Whither points the needle which is directing our thoughts, our wishes, our ideals—heavenwards or earthwards? Ah, with what care and earnestness must we prove the spirits in order to see whether we really desire to belong to our Lord Who came in the flesh! ‘He that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God.’ But for him who does so, this confession is not a mere matter of the lips, not a catechism learned by rote, no inherited orthodoxy. These do not necessarily touch the heart, or strengthen the will, or alter the manner of life; they can all go hand in hand with a spirit that is evil. To confess Him means to abide in Him, to see Him and know Him in spirit; ‘but whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, neither known Him.’¹ Confessing Him means dedicating to Him the whole of our being—body, soul, and spirit. It means a purer life *together with* a faithful belief in the articles of our faith, and therefore a real spiritual relationship with Him. Nothing is more fatal to Gospel teaching, and nothing disquieted our Lord more, than an unfruitful orthodoxy—a mere obser-

¹ 1 St. John iii. 6.

vance of the law, which was only a matter of the head but not of the heart, and therefore of no avail for sanctification of life.

Therefore, prove thyself, whether thou art 'of God.' Pray for the 'spirit of truth,' that thou mayest be enlightened. Fear not a painful humiliation if thou art forced to condemn thyself. Turn again to Him if thou findest that the attractions of the world have seduced thee. 'We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.'

'Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,
And lighten with celestial fire;
Thou the anointing Spirit art,
Who dost Thy sevenfold gifts impart.'

XII.

GOD IS LOVE.

‘Beloved, let us love one another : for love is of God ; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God ; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us.’—I JOHN iv. 7-12.

I.

ON the tombstone of Herder, a commentator on this Epistle, three words are engraved : ‘Life, Light, Love.’ They express the three great thoughts wherewith St. John sought to reveal the secret of the Divine Being. At the commencement of his Epistle he says : God is Life, the living One, from whom appeared life in Christ Jesus. Later on he announces the message which he had heard from his Master : ‘God is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all.’ The most beautiful, the most tender, and the most profound thought, however, is expressed in the passage before us : ‘God is Love.’

In ancient times there was a King who once asked the poet Simonides this question :

‘ What is God ?’

The poet begged that he might have one day to consider ; then he asked for another day, and then another, and then another. At last he answered :

‘ The longer I think over it, the more unable am I to give an answer.’

One, not as wise as he was, a simple fisherman of Galilee, St. John, was able to give the answer—an answer which not even the wisest men had been able to conceive of, which, indeed, would never have entered into the heart of man had not that humble fisherman given it : ‘ God is *Love*.’

It has been pointedly remarked that our familiarity with the Bible from childhood onwards often results in making even the most beautiful and touching passages lose much of their impressiveness, and that therefore they remain without power over us. We have heard and read the words hundreds of times, ‘ God is Love,’ until at last the thought has left the heart cold and unmoved. But suppose that you were able once more to hear the words *for the first time*, and, after long and deep pondering as to what God really is, the revelation suddenly burst upon you that ‘ God is Love.’ Think of the holy emotion which would seize your innermost soul, and which would impel you to kneel in devout adoration and offer purest worship to the God who is Love.

That God is *power* is obvious to man as soon as

he begins to observe his surroundings—the marvellous beauty of nature, the mighty raging of the elements, the illimitable spaces of the universe. That God is *wisdom* becomes clear to man as soon as he realizes the exquisite order of the material world and the unity of nature which runs through all things, great and small. That God is *righteousness* no man doubts, for he carries in his own conscience the unimpeachable witness thereof.

But that God is love! How should man believe this? Who ever conceived of such a thought? And yet the greatness of this thought is almost rivalled by its simplicity. It has but to be uttered in order to convince us that God's might and His wisdom and His righteousness are only the cloak upon Him, only the outstretched arm, only the sound of a footfall, only the light shining from His eyes; He Himself, His essential being, is expressed thus: 'God is love.'

Mark well the way St. John—to whom was vouchsafed the glory of uttering the words—attains to this greatest of all thoughts. He does not gain it by considering the signs of Divine favour in the beautiful world around him; nor does he infer it from the many proofs which he had had of God as the faithful Shepherd of souls; it is not by contemplating the history of his own people, wherein he might well see numberless instances of Divine love. All this would not suffice to bring him face to face with the great

thought that *God is love*. Nor, again, was it his own love to God that taught him this, for how poor and wavering is the best love that man can give! No, it is none of these things.

This is how St. John was led to that great thought: 'In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.' Yes, that is what brought the Divine thought to his mind. And yet it was not St. John who discovered what God was. No, it was God Who revealed it to him. Herein was love manifested, that God sent His only-begotten *Son* into the world. He not only sent messengers who should declare His love with mighty, soul-stirring words, though He sent these too—Elias and Isaiah, and John the Baptist; but what they had to announce was, after all, only the message.

The Son, the Only-begotten of the Father, brought more. It is true that He too proclaimed the message of the coming kingdom, but the kingdom of which He spoke had commenced in Him. It is true that He too preached the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, but it was He Who bestowed the gift of which He spoke. In His Person He gave that concerning which He bore witness. This was the great difference between Jesus and all the earlier prophets: that when the Son of God spoke of the Father, He spoke of His own. No one has ever seen God; but whatever has

been made visible of the invisible God took form in the Son of God, in His holiness and in His love. Whoever saw Him not only *heard* what God was, but also *looked upon* Him with his eyes, and touched Him with his hands; in Christ he saw God.

But almost in the same breath St. John adds to this something further, something even greater. Love might illuminate the world, but what if the world should never recognise it? The world spurned Love, and nailed It to the cross. But that which made Love overwhelming and all-subduing was this: that, instead of leaving the world to itself, a just retribution for its ingratitude and hate and malice, It gave up Its life as a propitiation, thus offering the only possible means of reconciliation between a fallen world and a loving but just God. On the cross of Jesus Christ, written in Divine characters, did St. John read the eternal message, 'God is Love.' In gazing up to that crucified Love which prayed for its enemies and murderers, St. John received the holy revelation which otherwise would never have entered into the heart of man.

As he bent his head at the foot of the cross in agonizing realization of his own sinfulness, and shuddered at the thought of how awful must be the guilt which required such an atonement, as he saw this fearful guilt borne and obliterated by the dying Lamb of God, then there flashed up in his burning heart the overwhelming conviction

that 'God is Love'—love brighter than sun, and wider than space, and purer than the limpid air of heaven. Of his own personal experience he learned that 'herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation of our sins.'

And from a like personal experience must thou too, dear Christian, learn. For *me* is God love, for *me* has He offered Himself a willing sacrifice; and not only for me, but for all, for everyone on earth, no matter how small and insignificant, no matter how bad and depraved, all, *all* are the objects of Divine love. Only when thou knowest God as the lover of all men dost thou truly know Him. For to know that God is power, this is a thought which can only make thee tremble. Power without love is terrible. To know that God is wisdom, this will call forth reverence, but it will not unlock the door of thy heart. To know that He is righteousness, this can only fill thee with dread, for thou knowest that thou art guilty and deservest punishment.

I dare not conceive of *my* God, Who is my salvation, my life, and my peace, as other than the God of Love. He is Love, and therefore even I, poor and helpless, may speak to Him as a child to its Father. He is Love, and His power, wisdom and righteousness are all subject to His love, therefore I have the blessed certainty that His power will uphold me, His wisdom will counsel me, His righteousness will guide me. He is Love,

and therefore I, though a sinful man, may look up to Him, for I know that He will receive again His lost child, will put away my sins, and will give to me the fulness of life and peace. God is Love; this shall be my hope when I walk through the dark valley and terror seizes me; then will I cling to my Lord and call upon Him, whose love has been manifested, and who gave Himself as a propitiation for my sins. And I bless Him for His infinite love, and I will repeat to myself again and again the most glorious message that was ever revealed to man—'God is Love.'

II.

But, certain as it is that God only acknowledges the man who sees in Him the God of Love, it is equally certain that only he who is *living* in love can recognise God as the God of Love. For St. John nowhere speaks of knowing God as something of the understanding only; with him it is always an experience which is gained by the co-operation of a faithful heart and an upright life. Knowing God in this sense is therefore only possible to the man who lays bare his soul to receive the Divine influence and by this means to partake of Divine love. We can understand worldly things without loving them, but we must love godly things in order to understand them. The eye which sees and knows God is the eye of love. Therefore St. John says simply: 'He that loveth not knoweth not God.'

He refers, of course, in the first instance to love towards God. Because God is Love, it is necessary to love Him in order to know Him. But it is characteristic of St. John that he does not differentiate between love to God and love to the brethren; one without the other is impossible—they are inseparable. ‘No man hath seen God at any time,’ he says, and he means that we cannot show love to the invisible God except in showing it to His visible children: ‘If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us.’ It seems, it is true, as though a link in the sequence of thought had been omitted when St. John says: ‘Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.’ We should expect, ‘Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love *Him*’; but, as has just been pointed out, in loving *one another* we show forth our love to *God*. He says in the seventh verse, ‘Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God.’

These words can scarcely be looked upon as an admonition; they are really only the emphasizing of what must necessarily be the heart’s attitude of every Christian. Wherever a spark of genuine love is found, we may be sure that it originates from God; for ‘everyone that loveth is born of God’—*i.e.*, bears in himself life which is Divine. Love is the family-likeness of God’s children. To display a spirit of genuine, unselfish

well-wishing to others is in itself evidence of knowing God, Who is Love. It is pitiable self-deception to think that we can abide in the love of God while discontent and anger find a place in our hearts; it is wickedness to seek the gift of Divine love and forgiveness in the Blessed Sacrament when we harbour bitter and loveless thoughts. When thy heart has become great and good through the conviction that God is Love for thee, that He loves thee in His Son, though thou deserve it not, then will thy heart be softened—it will go out in love to thy brethren. Thou wilt forgive when injured; thou wilt ask forgiveness if thou hast been unkind; thou wilt help where help is needed; thou wilt give that comfort may result; thou wilt become patient and long-suffering; *thou wilt remember the debt that has been forgiven thee*;¹ thou wilt cease to think solely of thyself—in a word, thou wilt become *loving*. ‘He that loveth not,’ says St. John, ‘knoweth not God.’

It is therefore only natural, when a man hates, and takes pleasure in the poison of slander, and fans the flame of strife, that he should always draw further and further away from God; he cannot understand love, therefore the God of love is nothing to him; he becomes ever less capable of praying, and therefore of finding the truth again, which would lead him back to God; he no more understands or knows God, and God knows him not.

¹ St. Matt. xviii. 27.

Beloved Christians, we who know God, Who is Love, 'let us love one another.' In very truth, if we do this we obey all commands. 'Love,' said St. Augustine, 'then mayst thou do whatsoever thou wilt.' We occupy different stations in life, but whether rich or poor, whether high-born or low-born, whether old or young, whether man or woman—whatever and whoever we are, is there a single one among us to whom this command does not apply, that we should live for others, and show love to others? Be thy object in life whatsoever it may, whether it be to fulfil thy calling, to attend to thy business, to increase thy fortune, to manage thy household, to busy thyself with learning—be it the most exalted and glorious profession in the world, thou art here for something still higher; thou must declare the love of God to thy brethren by patience towards the gainsayers, by comforting the sorrowful, by counselling those in perplexity, by unselfish ministering to the wants of others, by willing self-effacement, by forgiveness, by the offering up of thy whole life. Art thou lacking in that which is greatest? Why then, the world may perhaps extol thee, but thy name will not be written in God's book. But if love be the foundation of all thy working and striving, then be comforted: on earth thou mayest be neglected and forgotten, but in heaven it is not thought that thou hast lived in vain.

The command to love endures throughout all

ages. All that the heart loves here is passing away. How soon we elder ones learn that the joys of youth have lost their delight! We learn with surprise how quickly all things change—how the vigour of manhood gives place to the feebleness of age. One thing abides, in youth as well as in old age, a golden thread, which blesses youth and sanctifies old age; it runs through life, it hallows life, it makes life, oh, so beautiful, it is—*love*.

The command to love ne'er waxes old, each day it is renewed. True, its demands are different in youth from what they are in old age, when new and hitherto unknown problems present themselves; but be its demands what they may, differ as they may, they never cease; they are always there to claim our best acts and our best thoughts. How often we hear the aged say that their time is run, that they are now of no further use on earth; nay, think of this, thou who art well stricken in years: he who still loves can *never* be superfluous.

Two learned theologians once lived in Berlin, and taught theology to many generations of students at the University, namely, August Twesten and Carl Immanuel Nitzsch. When Twesten stood at the death-bed of his friend, to look once more upon those loved features, Nitzsch pointed to his decaying body, and said: 'I can do no more now but—love.' And thank God, if we can do that, it shall suffice. The love 'which

never ceases' reaches beyond death, and beautifies eternity.

The Gospel of God must be proclaimed by means of this love, which is its life. 'Whosoever loveth is born of God.' In this love does man show forth his claims to Divine childhood, and the proof of Divine strength; hereby he preaches the Word of God, not in word, but nevertheless with irresistible power and eloquence. We need men who will testify by their love that they know God, Who is Love. The great power of the Gospel is concentrated in one little spot—the human heart. If a man once becomes a man of love, victory will always be his.

We are told of two of the most celebrated reformers (Calvin and Melancthon) that their crests were, of the former, a bleeding heart, with the legend, 'I give myself to Thee,' underneath; of the latter, a lighted candle, with the legend, 'Aliis serviendo consumor.'¹

Let us give our hearts to God, e'en though they be bleeding with many wounds, for sin and the world have thrust sore at us. He will heal the bleeding and broken heart. Let us, sanctified by Him Who is Love, cause our light so to shine before men by the sacrifice of self, that we may learn to know Him, and teach others to know Him, through a life of love.

¹ 'In ministering to others I sacrifice myself.'

XIII.

LOVE AND FEAR.

‘And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love Him, because He first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from Him, That He who loveth God love his brother also.’—I JOHN iv. 14-21.

THE thoughts contained in this passage seem to be not only connected with those of the preceding section, but to be even covered by them. For here again is the central thought the same, viz., ‘God is Love.’ Here again the Apostle shows to us how he attained to this knowledge, namely, by the contemplation of God’s inexpressible love in sending His Son to be the Saviour of the world; and here again he points out that the only way to come to a true knowledge of God is by fostering earnest and

genuine love in our hearts. Love of God and love of the brethren are inseparable.

But in spite of thus going over the same ground, St. John brings new light and new thoughts to view in the verses before us. Three times in this passage he speaks of the necessity of our love being 'perfect.' In speaking of 'perfect' love, he does not mean love which is incapable of further development—this would be impossible on this earth. He, however, demands that it should be perfect in the sense of being manifested in all directions and under all circumstances, thereby revealing its essential character. And he brings this before us in a very significant manner, viz., by laying stress on the fearlessness of love: 'Perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.' Let us occupy ourselves with this thought now. It is one which throws its light backward, and helps us to understand anew the words, 'God is love'; it also casts its light forward and teaches us from a new point of view our duty of love towards our brethren. We must treat of this under two heads:

- (1) There is a perfect love which casts out fear;
- (2) There is a holy fear which perfects love.

I.

It is not difficult to understand that love and fear, in a general way of speaking, exclude each other. I naturally avoid what I am afraid of;

what I love I yearn for and search for wherever it can be found. In presence of what I fear my heart is in terror; in presence of one that I love my heart beats for joy. Fear is painful, love is joyous; fear weakens my powers, love gives them wings; fear makes all things hard, love makes the hardest light. Therefore perfect love casts out fear. He who still fears has not yet learned what perfect love is.

But these general statements only receive their full certainty and significance as various circumstances arise. We are speaking now of love to God, and of fear to God. Herein is the fearlessness of love shown: when we are enabled to look up to God with joyous trust and open countenance even on the day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts will be made manifest, and the Holy One Himself will judge concerning the hidden things of the heart. The bare mention of this thought raises the question: whence this love, which is the source of all fearlessness? For the Apostle knows as well as we do that this fearlessness does not belong to us in the natural order of things. Open that great Book which knows man and describes him as no other book can do; read how Adam sought to hide himself from the eye of the living God, and could not escape from the tormenting voice of his conscience; learn from David how by 'holding his tongue' he thought he could hide his sins from God, and how God's hand was yet 'heavy upon him day

and night.¹ Bring to mind the picture of Judas in despair, or of St. Peter in his deep contrition. Think of the silent pleading of that poor palsied man, yearning for the forgiveness of his sins, though he scarcely knew yet what it meant²; or think of the bitter tears with which St. Mary Magdalene sought to wash away her sins. *One* emotion masters them all—fear of the living God; *one* thing troubles them all—terror of the Judge's sentence. This fear is nothing else than *God's reply to their sins*. Between them and their God stands their guilt, and as long as their guilt is upon them, His anger rests upon them too, and therefore that terrible fear for their souls! It is impossible for a man who is sinful to come fearlessly and with childlike trust into the presence of his God, and to look up to Him and be looked upon by Him without the terror which a guilty conscience inspires.

The heathen systems of belief are built up upon the fear that is entertained for their deities. This is only a further proof of the fact that fear is natural to man in presence of the deity. We all, by our conscience, testify to the truth of this. Even though many affirm that they have never experienced this sensation of fear, let but their conscience awake, and it will become apparent. Without knowing it, men live in constant flight from God. The thought of God is disagreeable

¹ Ps. xxxii. 3, 4, P.B.V.

² St. Luke v. 18-20.

to thee: it enters into thy life as a disturbing element. Thou art intent upon avoiding the presence of God; thou art angry when spoken to or reminded of God. What does this prove but that in the depths of thy soul not love, but fear, holds sway—that, deep down in thy heart the dark horror of God's judgment is terrifying thee, and that the worrying pain of an uneasy conscience is maddening thee? How is it that St. John knows nothing of this terrible fear? Why is his relationship to God so utterly different from that of most men? Whence has he that deep feeling of love, that holy, glowing love which makes his heart so rapturously exclaim, 'There is no fear'?

We know what the Apostle would answer to this. He, too, once felt as we do. His heart sank within him at the thought of a just God; that was when he was a follower of the Baptist, and his conscience awoke, and the question of his salvation became one of all-absorbing importance. But when he became a disciple of his Saviour new life opened out to him. In Christ he learned what love was, and that God loved him; in Christ he saw the essence of the Father, and learned that God was the God of love; through Christ, Who first loved him, did he experience that new Divine life of love to the Saviour, of love to God. In the sunshine of God's love there sprang up a new relationship to Him—God dwelt in him and he in God. That is where he learned that love in which is no fear. 'Perfect love casteth out fear.'

But this is not to be the experience of the Apostle only, this gift is not to be bestowed upon one favoured and privileged child of man alone. The Apostle himself had seen and borne witness that the Father sent His Son to be the Saviour of the *world*. There is a love which is greater than man's sinfulness, a love which has appeared in Christ Jesus, a love which melts with its warm rays the icy covering of a hardened heart, a love which overcomes fear, and bids us cry: 'Let us love Him, for He first loved us'; and the knowledge, the experience, the attainment of this love is the deepest secret of our personal religion; the experience of it gives us power over sin and assures us of God's favour. We have felt its Divine influence when we have knelt at God's altar, when we have offered up our secret prayers, when our hearts have been stirred by the voice of God within. And whoever has felt the infinite sweetness of this love has been driven to ask that devout question of the Psalmist: 'What reward shall I give unto the Lord for all the benefits that He hath done unto me?'¹ He has learned that this perfect love has cast out fear. It casts out *all* fear, so that, as St. John says, 'we may have boldness in the day of judgment.' If sin has been obliterated through the saving grace of Christ, then the Judge Himself has no sentence to pronounce. Even the sin that still cleaves to us as long as we walk on this earth cannot harm us if

¹ Ps. cxvi. 2, P.B.V.

we from our hearts acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, the righteous Advocate; and where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation. How, then, shall there be fear which causeth pain?

We all of us by nature stand under the ban of the fear of death. It is not the closing of life that is the most terrible, but rather the shrouded secret of what there is in store after death, and the awful question of eternity.

This is what makes death so full of terror. But he that has the forgiveness of sins is comforted even in death. A love which was exercised in *this* life only would not be Divine. God's love abides in eternity; the sun of His love shines brightly when the earthly sun has set. He who truly loves God will regard death as the return home to the Father's heart. 'We shall see Him,' wrote St. John, 'as He is.' He who still fears is not made 'perfect in love.'

We all feel the burden of this world's cares. Christianity itself does not profess to relieve us of these, but it *does* assure us that they are 'not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed';¹ Christianity assures us, moreover, that 'all things work together for good to those that love Him.'² God does not lay greater burdens upon us than we are able to bear;³ even in the midst of our sorrows He gives comfort to those who will have it. He who loves will kiss the whip that scourges him, for he knows that *His*

¹ Rom. viii. 8.

² Rom. viii. 28.

³ 1 Cor. x. 13.

are strokes of love, leading to salvation; they may force bitter tears from us, but they can never make us fearful; he that fears is not yet made 'perfect in love.'

We must remember that it is a hostile world in which we live. These days are anxious ones; they furnish much that causes anxiety and sorrow, and it is just those who love the Lord, and in Him their brethren, who feel this and realize it more than others. The more love masters our hearts, the more sensitive are we to the sorrows of others; the deeper our love to God, the more painful to us that denial of the living God which unbelief brings forth. But one thing the true heart does *not* know, viz., fear in its love. Only he who has no love can ever give way to despair. God, Who once, long ago, embraced the world with His redeeming love, continues His blessed work of redemption to-day; but we are to be His co-workers in love, for in His love we see the power which vivifies ours, in His love may we see the beautiful pattern after which to fashion ours. We so often meet men who seem to be entirely uninfluenced by love, people with whom it is impossible to live on terms of cordiality, because they are apparently dead to all those gentler impulses which so often gladden life and sweeten the intercourse between man and man. Nevertheless we must be tolerant and persevering even with these, for our love must be long-suffering, and we must never despair of any, but hopefully

look forward to the victory which love must eventually win over the hearts of all men ; indeed, the more devoted our life, the wider will our own hearts grow, and the less opportunity shall we have for despairing. Where love is true there will be no room for fear, no time for weariness ; love for others will be all-enduring, faith unconquerable. But if fear creeps in, love will be imperfect, ‘ for *perfect* love casteth out fear.’

II.

But let us now consider the converse of what has been said ; for not only is it true that perfect love casts out fear, but holy fear perfects love. We speak now of love to God. This love casts out fear ; but it is no contradiction when we are bidden by St. Paul to work out our own salvation ‘ with fear and trembling !’¹ For the more powerfully we realize the greatness of that Love which came into the world to redeem us, the greater must be the fear and anxiety lest this Love of a compassionate God should be lavished upon us in vain. The more precious we feel the salvation to be which His love has purchased for us, the more terrible and fearful shall we be lest through our guilt we should lose so great salvation.

There is a fear of God which is slavish, a fear which, in the words of St. Augustine, ‘ dreads the near approach of God ’ ; but this fear ceases when

¹ Phil. ii. 12.

conscience has been stilled and sin forgiven, and the heart has been made joyful through the realization of God's great love. There is also a childlike fear, which 'fears lest God should leave us.' This fear is always there; it never can cease; it is an element of love itself; it partakes of the nature of that holy reverence of which the Psalmist speaks: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.'¹ It is nothing else than the earnest wish not to grieve God, therefore it makes the conscience sensitive as nothing else can, for in all small and apparently harmless things it warns conscience and points out when the least deviation from the right way has been entered upon; it ceases not its unrest until every cruel word, every inconsiderate act and unkind thought, has been plucked up and cast away, just as the natural eye ceases not to run with tears until every cause of irritation has been removed. Through this beautiful 'fear' that son, long lost but found again, becomes so gentle in his love, so faithful in his obedience, and so unselfish in his behaviour, that, as compared with him, the would-be better son appears as a spoiled and discontented servant. The source of this childlike fear is grateful love to his father. St. Paul discloses a similar holy fear when he says: 'And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence towards God, and towards men.'² So, too, St. Polycarp, the disciple

¹ Ps. cxi. 10, P.B.V.

² Acts xxiv. 16.

of St. John. When in Smyrna he was offered the choice between the stake and denying God; he answered, 'Eighty-and-six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong; how can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?' In like manner Luther also declared that he would rather suffer all things than outrage his conscience.

Christians, have ye learned what this holy fear is? Have ye seen it in your daily lives, in the temptations which assail you? Have ye felt it when alone in the presence of God? Your love to God cannot be made perfect without this holy fear.

St. John now leads us to contemplate once again the indissoluble connection between love to God and love to the brethren; each of these is to him, as already pointed out, incomplete without the other. We have, according to St. John, just so much love to God as we have love to our brethren, therefore he returns (verse 20) to the thought which he has expressed so often before: 'If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God, whom he hath not seen?' He again chooses expressions which sound harsh, and seem almost to be exaggerated. And yet, does not this harsh expression of 'hating' disclose just exactly those evil emotions which sometimes master our hearts?

A commentator, writing on this verse, has said:

‘ We have no love to God, as long as it is possible for us to hate ’; and it is the duty of every Christian to put this solemn question to himself: ‘ Have I forgotten how to hate ? ’

The sense of the passage before us permits us to consider the subject from a somewhat different point of view; for perfect love to God comprises also a *fear* lest we should fail to exercise love to the brethren. Dear Christians, have you ever considered this, that on the Day of Judgment we shall be called to account not only in regard to sins of commission, but also in regard to sins of omission? And what sin of omission can weigh more heavily, can pain more acutely, than that of love unfulfilled? Think of the small circle of thine own household—wife, child, brothers and sisters; perhaps it was during the saddest moment of thy life, at a death-bed, by a grave-side, that the awful thought flashed upon thee, ‘ I might have loved him more ! ’ Who among us can say that he is not lacking in deeds of love even towards those he loves most? Think, again, of that wider circle—the community in which thou livest—the careful observer will, without fail, notice one thing: the numberless cases of want and sorrow which are the result of love withheld. Every offence against love of the brethren is a poisonous seed, from which the fruit of hate is grown. Could we but lay bare the *roots* from which anger and hate draw power and strength, how often we should see that these

roots were refusals to love, opportunities of loving disregarded, cries of pity unheeded, acts of mercy left undone—like Dives, unconcerned and uncaring while poor Lazarus lay groaning at his very gate!

Oh for the blessed fear that fears to sin! And let us include in this fear that other holy *fear of withholding love*. We often and often hear the sigh of pity from the lips of our Saviour, pity for unloving, selfish humanity, but never a regret or a protest at the demands made upon Him or at the evil imputed to Him; His holy zeal is all concentrated upon the work which He came to fulfil: 'I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work!'¹

The time is short, our task is great, the thought of neglecting our present opportunity terrible. *To-day*, while we can, we must love; *to-day* we must forgive, and give, in love; *to-day* let holy fear seize us, for this will make love active, burning and zealous; then shall our love be perfect, then shall we have boldness, even in the Day of Judgment.

¹ St. John ix. 4.

XIV.

THE VICTORY OF FAITH.

‘Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God : and everyone that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments : and His commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world : and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.’—1 JOHN v. 1-4.

THE time at which St. John wrote, namely, at the end of the first century, was in some respects similar to our own. It was a time in which the first glow of love had begun to cool in the hearts of many ; false teaching in many forms had brought confusion into the circle of believers ; it was a time in which it seemed that the little handful of Christians must surely be overwhelmed and swept away by the mighty torrent of a world of wealth, luxury and pleasure. Yet at such a time St. John wrote, in plain and simple words : ‘ This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.’ Christians, if to many the problems of to-day appear insoluble, if the Church seems doomed, and our faith weak and our love cold—if, as many think, the number of Christ’s

followers is dwindling, and the battle against unbelief and the world is hopeless—let us take for our watchword, and as a means of hope and encouragement, the mighty declaration of the Apostle: ‘This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.’

We proceed to inquire :

1. What is this faith ?
2. By what methods is faith to gain the victory ?

I.

‘This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.’ We are accustomed to look upon these words almost as a hymn of the heavenly host, a song which is sung in heaven, far above the grovelling world, with all its sorrow and sin and care. Not so St. John. It is clear from the context that he is not carried away by the passing inspiration of the moment, which would be belied by the sober reality of facts. It is far from his wont to minimize the contrast between the world and the Gospel by means of elegant phraseology. It is not his wish to prophesy some unthought-of victory, and thereby to raise hopes which the actual realities will falsify forthwith. No; he utters a genuine, perfect, unshaken and unshakeable experience when he says: ‘Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.’

What faith is this ?

We are all able to give the answer to this question. Every page of the New Testament proclaims it ; we learned it in our Catechism ; the preaching of the Gospel never tires of repeating it. The Apostle compresses it in the shortest possible form when he says: ' Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.' The belief that Jesus is the Christ is the all-powerful watchword which overcomes the world. ' Jesus, the Christ,' *i.e.*, the Anointed One—anointed, not with oil, like the priests and kings of the Old Covenant, but with the sevenfold outpouring of the Holy Spirit of God. St. John points, in fact, to the *Personality* of our Saviour, not to any doctrine which He taught, for doctrines have not redeemed the world. The power which redeemed the world went out solely from one Person, Jesus, the Christ, the Sum of our belief, the Foundation of our faith. He is the Christ because, as the Apostle adds, He is the ' Son of God ' ; because, prior to the life He lived on earth, there is another life which runs through all eternity ; because He is the Word made flesh, the eternal Love Which redeemed the world—Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten of the Father, and therefore the Redeemer of the world, the Refuge from all sorrow, the Saviour from all sin ; that is the sum and substance of our faith. He who believes this, says St. John, overcomes the world.

Should the question be asked, How can faith

accomplish such great things? the answer is one which every child could give. For in the Apostle's sense of the word, faith, of course, does not mean 'to regard as true'; if it meant no more than this it could overcome nothing. But faith, according to him, means the surrender of the heart, of the whole being, to Him in Whom we believe. This surely is true of every belief. He that believes in a friend and in his faithfulness willingly resigns himself into his hands; he that believes in the capability of a general, follows him unflinchingly. Even a false belief exercises a wonderful power over men; nothing of any moment happens on earth without faith of some kind.

But, then, faith in Jesus as the Christ! This faith is nothing less than an entire surrender of self, even though the whole world should oppose it. It means acknowledging Him, even though the world should deny Him; it implies a following in His footsteps, even though all men should forsake Him. Always and everywhere is that which a man believes a very part of his inner life—the really deciding factor of all his actions. He who believes only in himself becomes narrow, petty, pitiful; he who believes in Christ as the Saviour of his soul enters into the domain of the Divine; he becomes godly, large-hearted, holy; the influence of Jesus abides in him—a power by means of which new life springs up in him; 'Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God'

—*i.e.*, new, God-given life is generated in him—and ‘whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world.’ Here, again, is a trust so simple, so natural, that it needs no proof to prove it true. Of course, the world is not stronger than God, but God is stronger than the world, and therefore whatever is born of God must conquer the world. Only he that is not sure of his God can surrender to the world. ‘If God be for us, who can be against us?’¹

There are three ways whereby the world exercises its power over men :

- i. By its sorrows ;
- ii. By its smiles ;
- iii. By its sins.

It may crush him with its *sorrows*. Think of a man misjudged by his relations, mistrusted by his friends, the victim of unjust neglect, ruined, at the graveside of his beloved. He who is one with his God knows that all this cannot harm his soul, cannot rob him of salvation, cannot deprive him of the peace of God—nay, rather he knows that in God’s hand the most terrible grief is but a school wherein he may learn more of God, wherein he may be made fit for heaven. However heavy his cross may be, he will learn to bear it ; *He will overcome the world.*

Again, the world may weigh him down with the burden of *good fortune*. Think of a man loaded with honours, favours, and all earth’s happiness.

¹ Rom. viii. 31.

The smiles of the world are far more ruinous to men than its frowns. Prosperity numbs the soul and blunts the edge of conscience. The glamour of worldly honour captivates the heart—as though it *could* be satiated with earth's worthless baubles! He who in faith is one with his Lord knows that naught is gain which damages the soul. Plunged in the whirlpool of earthly pleasure, sinking into the deep of earth's seducing joys, he cries, he shrieks aloud: 'God, save—ah, save my soul!' If but in faith he holds his Saviour's hand, he will be conqueror yet; *he will overcome the world.*

Or, once more, the world may conquer man with its *sins*. Like poisonous darts showered from every side, manifold temptations appear in varied guise: a form flits past him; it is an opportunity to sin. Left alone, he still sees in himself further occasion for sin. How we all bear the scars—yea, rather the open wounds—of conflicts with ourselves! All, young and old, are daily wearied by this painful wrestling with sin—sin which ever cleaves to us, and seeks to make us the victims of sloth. Our way is marked, not, alas! with memories of triumphs won, but with monuments of shameful defeats. But one thing remains unalterably fixed, and thy personal experience will testify to the truth of this: As long as thou art one with thy Lord, sin can have no dominion over thee; as long as thou retainest the power of God in faith, thou wilt be incapable of sin. 'Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth

not.¹ In Him we are stronger than the world, and can overcome the world.

This is surely the only explanation of the miraculous story of the Gospel on earth. Who were the people who proved stronger than Grecian sages, and more powerful than the world's champions of those days? They were of humblest origin, belonging to the lower classes—fishermen and publicans—but they were strong in the strength of faith, armed with the spirit of sanctification, and therefore stronger than the world. It is the same now; the fight is carried on to-day as hotly as ever, the alternatives are the same—flesh or spirit, the hope of eternity or the transitory pleasures of the world, Christianity or unbelief. But the victory lies not in subtle argument, whereby men seek to maintain their points. Argue not about the faith, however cleverly; victory is not won by that, but by the power of a sanctified personality, in which faith in Jesus has called into being a new, a Divine, life. And these sanctified personalities are not found only among the great ones of the earth—the prophets, the poets, and the thinkers—but also, perhaps in a greater degree, among those less exalted. This son, who has successfully fought against the flesh and overcome the Evil One; that daughter, who has conquered self after many a bitter struggle; this father or mother, who has won the battle through faith in Jesus, in spite of daily worries

¹ 1 St. John iii. 6.

and anxieties, in spite of fears within and trials without—these are the conquerors who have overcome the world, and their presence among us to-day proves that their faith *is* the victory that overcometh the world.

II.

But let it not be thought that the adversary has been fully overcome when it has been proved that thou art the stronger. For the victory to be complete the strong man must be bound, and compelled to obey the stronger. Only then is our faith the victory which overcometh the world, when the unbelieving and godless world has been led to the obedience of Christ, and has acknowledged that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. And so the question arises by what methods our faith, which is stronger than the world, is to gain the full victory by leading the world to the obedience of Christ.

The methods are not new; St. John mentions them, for he himself had tried them. In the anxieties of those days a spirit of unrest had possessed even the Christians; they thought that new powers must be set in motion, new ways sought, new means applied in order to carry the banner of the Gospel triumphantly through that world of ferment and restlessness. They were wrong, for just as the old faith was the conqueror of the world, so also were the same old powers and gifts

sufficient for all purposes. They are new only in the sense that they must be renewed in every age. And these means and methods are: Love to God and to the brethren.

He that is born of God loves God as his Father, Who gave him being, and 'everyone that loveth Him that begat' (*i.e.*, God) 'loveth Him also that is begotten of Him' (*i.e.*, his brother). This love is the reflection of a true faith, the sign of its existence; without the power of this love faith is dead. Only *that* faith conquers which faces the world with the power of love. It needs no words to prove that the Apostle is right in this. What has at all times done most harm to the Church? I answer: A faith (if one may call it so) which perhaps in some respects edified, which comforted in times of sorrow, which adorned an upright life, but which did not illuminate, which had no warmth, which did not make the believer better or more loving than others who possessed it not. Again: To what has been due in every age the sowing of rich and plentiful seed which in its season has brought forth the fruit of a pure faith undefiled? I answer: It has been due to personalities in whose life the power of faith was set forth in unselfish, ministering, and pitying love. Thank God such men have never been wanting in any age! But just to-day, when men are tearing asunder love and faith after a new fashion, with the watchword: 'It matters not what you believe; the only question is, how you

live'—just to-day it is the task and duty of Christianity to show forth the foundation of life in faith, and the sanctifying power of faith in love.

To-day, while men are wickedly strewing abroad the poisonous seeds of hate, instead of love, which is to redeem the world—to-day, while this evil influence is possessing the hearts of thousands, and its flames are flaring upon all around, to-day must thou, Christian, live and preach the Gospel of love by a life whose upright, honest, loving course, will speak more eloquently than words. Love is a relationship between two. Love is a *personal* thing. To thee, to me, personally, the question is addressed: Is such love in our midst?

Listen, before you answer, to the description of it which the Apostle gives: 'By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments.' He measures his love to the brethren by his love to God. He loves them for the Father's sake. There is a love which is often characteristic of people who are naturally of a mild and easy-going temperament. This love, though apparently unselfish, is not really so, for it is but the outcome of a *laissez faire* disposition, and therefore selfish; it may, in many respects, resemble genuine love. But one thing it lacks—the stamp of Divine love; for it will disregard the commandment of God in order that it may not displease men; it is not a *holy* love. A love which emanates from God

calls sin by its right name; it punishes, it pains, but still loves. You who are fathers and mothers, is this the kind of love you bear towards your children? You who are friends, is your love so genuine that you are for your companions, not only friends, but also a conscience one to another?

There is a natural love which loves all who are amiable and kind-hearted; this too resembles that genuine love. But one thing it lacks, it ceases when confronted with anyone unloving and cruel, when brought in contact with human sin and ingratitude. The love which is of God loves Him in the brethren. It is the face of God which is impressed upon man's features, even when they are marred and disfigured by sin. That is why Divine love is extended to the lost and perishing; it despairs of none, it waits for the time when the stony heart of to-day will be softened, and will open itself out to eternal love.

The love which observes God's commandments is also a love which is joyful. 'This is the love of God that we keep His commandments, and His commandments are not grievous.' Where the love of God abounds it is easy to keep His commandments; they are not oppressive or burdensome, but joyous. This is the supreme delight of a love which is the outcome of faith, that it gives contentment and happiness, and transforms the hard drudgery of life into a blessed activity. The cheerful sacrifice of self for

the welfare of others has always been a power which has affected men for good in an indefinite degree.

Is such love in us? Is such love in thee? Let us take heed lest, instead of answering, we point to the manifold works of love carried out in our midst. Remember that it is a question of something *personal*, of the measure of thy individual self-sacrifice and love among thy brethren. Thou canst have no substitute to hold the faith for thee, no man can exercise this love in place of thee—this love which carries in its bosom faith. Thy offerings and subscriptions, thy interest in many institutions—this is not yet *personal* love, neither can it take the place nor relieve thee of *personal love*, which is the relationship between man and man. Begin to exercise this love—begin, however humbly, at home, in thine own house—only *begin*. I remember a touching incident of a noble lady who declared that she had never been able to understand the words, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,’ until one day she found on her own doorstep a poor half-frozen child. In tending and caring for this dear little forsaken soul she learned the blessed experience, and said: ‘I love that child as though it were my own.’

When hast thou, O Christian, had this feeling, this consciousness? When hast thou exercised a love in which all thought of self was absent—a love which was not prompted by any ulterior

motives ; a love wherein one thought alone held sway : to serve thy God Whom in faith thou worshippest ?

What the world of to-day needs is this stream of living love, the whole unfolding of the power of love, which God has encased in faith as its secret strength—love irresistible. Such love may be witnessed in some to-day, and has been known to quench the flame of hate. A well-known leader of the Social Democrats once came to a Berlin deaconess in order to express to her, on behalf of his followers, the remarkable acknowledgment : ‘ We are convinced that you are genuine.’ Genuine ! What mountains of prejudice and animosity those words imply ! and yet how intensely solemn if we take the word and apply it to ourselves, with the question : Are thy friends, who *know* thee, thy servants, thy neighbours, convinced that thou art genuine, honest, sincere in thy wish to love unselfishly, to live for others in genuine self-sacrifice, to forget thyself in ministering to thy brethren ? That God gives to faith the victory is absolutely certain, but whether He gives the victory to *thy* faith, that depends upon the sincerity wherewith thou showest forth the power of love *in faith*. God desires not, so I have read, that the *conversion* of the world should be accomplished more quickly than the *sanctification* of His followers ; but the commencement of this sanctification is the genuineness of our brotherly love, the consciousness of our responsibility, the debt

we owe to all,¹ which we prove by our works of love. Hereby will our faith be the victory which overcometh the world.

Whether this victory will be an outward, visible one we know not. It is possible that the victory may be accorded to us in something of the same sense which is contained in the words of the aged Cyprian: 'The Bishop with the book of the Gospels in his hand may be killed, but he cannot be overcome'; and St. John, in pointing to Him Who laid down His life for us, drew the natural inference that 'we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren';² *i.e.*, defeat may *apparently* be ours, but our *faith* will conquer—that is as certain as that God is stronger than the world.

Then let us, beloved Christians, stand shoulder to shoulder, firm in the faith. Wherever we may come from, however distant the national churches to which we belong, let us at least be united in this holy, *faithful* love—love which is the visible proof of faith, faith which is the foundation and motive-power of love.³ 'This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.'

¹ Rom. xiii. 8: 'Owe no man anything, but to love one another.'

² I St. John iii. 16.

³ Gal. v. 6: 'Faith which worketh by love.'

XV.

THE INVULNERABILITY OF FAITH.

‘Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? This is He that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which He hath testified of His Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made Him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of His Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.’—I JOHN v. 5-12.

AT first sight these verses appear more difficult and hard to understand than any we have yet considered. Nevertheless, the connection of the whole passage shows clearly what was in the Apostle’s mind. He had just uttered those great words expressive of a living faith: ‘Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith’ (verse 4). And he then pithily summarizes this faith by the

exclamation: 'Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?' But stupendous as these words are, definite, and the outcome of a deep conviction, are they *true*? Does not the assertion that 'faith overcomes the world,' stand in crying contrast to actual facts? Even assuming that St. John wrote these words as a prophecy, which in course of time would be fulfilled, the question arises, 'Have they been fulfilled?' Are they not as much disputed to-day as in St. John's time? Is it not just from within the pale of Christianity—which should have been the means of fulfilling these words—that the most dangerous adversaries of the Gospel arise? After all these hundreds of years of apparent failure, can the Christian faith still be regarded as credible, as acceptable? Are proofs of its truth forthcoming—proofs which will convince unbelievers, and lead them to a devout acceptance of it?

These are the questions which the Apostle in the passage before us not only contemplates, but also answers by anticipation; he answers them with a distinct and emphatic '*Yes.*' There is, according to him, one proof which makes the truth of the Christian faith incontrovertible, more powerful than all that the world can urge in opposition. The living God Himself appears as witness, to attest that the Son Whom He has sent is the Redeemer of mankind, the Saviour of the world.

I.

First: What is this proof which the Apostle gives concerning the incontestible truth of the Christian faith? Truly the expressions he uses in giving it are for us almost incomprehensible. He writes, as every author must do, for the people of his own time. He refutes adversaries and false teachers who were then living, and therefore his words and expressions, though strange to our ears, were such as entirely corresponded with the requirements of those days. One thing, however, is quite clear, viz., the Christian faith is only world-conquering because it is a belief in the Son of God. And because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the Redeemer of the world, therefore is the threefold proof of which the Apostle speaks of supreme importance. 'This,' he says, namely Christ, Whose personality is the central point of your belief, 'is He that came,' in visible, bodily form, 'by water and blood; not by water only, but by water and blood.' What does this mean? He came with water, literally, 'by means of water,' when He submitted to baptism by John the Baptist. The Apostle points back to His baptism. At baptism our Lord entered upon the office of Redeemer, and was consecrated to the Messiahship. At baptism there beams forth upon Him, for the first time, the glory of the Son of God, as

St. John himself tells us in his Gospel.¹ At His baptism our Lord, in His priestly love, taking upon Himself man's guilt and sin, first announced the near approach of the kingdom of heaven, gathered His disciples, among whom St. John was one of the first, and revealed to them His glory, so that, like Nathanael, they must needs confess: 'Thou art the Son of God, the King of Israel;'² and bear witness like St. Peter: 'Thou hast the words of eternal life.'³ But the waters of baptism indicate only the beginning of His Saviourship. The fulness of His glory is not revealed until He 'comes with blood.' The Apostle refers to His dying, His crucifixion. With express emphasis he says: 'He came not with water alone, but with water and blood.' Baptism by itself does not prove Him to be the Redeemer. The false teachers were quite willing to admit the reality of His baptism; but they denied that the Son of God could have submitted to the ignominy of death. Christ crucified was to them, as to the Jews, as St. Paul said, 'a stumbling-block.'⁴ Therefore they separated the divinity of our Lord from His humanity in a most peculiar, and to us strange, manner; they asserted that at the moment of His baptism the eternal 'word,' which 'became flesh' in Christ,

¹ St. John i. 34: 'And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.'

² St. John i. 49.

³ St. John vi. 68.

⁴ I Cor. i. 23: 'But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness.'

joined itself to the *man* Jesus, and further, that this divinity was withdrawn from Him at the commencement of His Passion. In this manner they transformed the historical personality of the Saviour, Who had appeared in Divine-human glory, had taught, suffered, and died, into a vague, unreal phantasm. They did not deny that Jesus had died, but they did deny that One Who had suffered death could be the Redeemer, or that He could have anything to do with Redemption.

As we have already seen,¹ they regarded the 'ideal Christ' as the Redeemer; the historical, the actual Christ was, so they maintained, of no moment. Therefore St. John lays special stress and emphasis upon the fact that He came 'not by water only, but by water and blood.' The office of Redeemer, which commenced with the baptism of our Lord, was not completed until the shedding of blood upon the cross. The seed brings forth no fruit until it has fallen into the ground and died.² Only through death, and reconciliation through death, does our Lord become Redeemer. The full manifestation of His glory is seen in His bitterest humiliation. In order that we might receive the full benefit of grace, of forgiveness, and the certainty of eternal life, He came, 'not by water only, but by water

¹ P. 147, note.

² St. John xii. 24: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth not; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.'

and blood.' He is the Redeemer; whosoever hath Him hath life.

But the fact remains that the 'water and the blood,' the baptism and death of our Saviour, were not understood. His death especially was, even for His disciples, something not only terrible, but also incomprehensible, until that third Witness came—the Witness to Whom our Lord Himself pointed—the Witness Who was to abide with the disciples, Who was to bring 'all things to their remembrance,'¹ and 'guide them into all truth'²—the Holy Ghost. Therefore the Apostle adds: 'It is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.' It is through the Spirit of God that the dead seed in the Apostles becomes living; through the Spirit of God they go out into the world and preach the Gospel; through the Spirit they receive new understanding; they learn what Divine power, what Divine wisdom, is; through the Spirit, also, they learned that baptism was our Lord's consecration to the office of Redeemer, and that His death was the great sacrifice which He, as High Priest, offered for the reconciliation of the world; through the Spirit the image of Jesus Christ, the Living One, becomes living to them, and makes them not only the messengers of what they had heard, but also the witnesses of what they had experienced. It is this Spirit Who still continues to bear witness in the assemblies of the

¹ St. John xiv. 26.

² St. John xvi. 13.

faithful, and Who teaches men that the Son of God is indeed the Redeemer of the world.

Who guides the arrow of the word of God, so that it penetrates into the conscience of man? It is the Holy Ghost. Who arouses in death-stricken souls the yearning for peace and the need of salvation? It is the Holy Ghost. Who makes Christ present in the preaching of His Word and in the Blessed Sacrament? It is the Spirit of truth. So there are three which bear record on earth—the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and only in the power of the Spirit do the other witnesses become living and convincing. But ‘these three agree in one’—*i.e.*, they have one common object: to declare Jesus Christ as the Son of God, as the Redeemer of the world.

It is decreed according to the law (for this seems to be the Apostle’s train of thought) that every truth must be substantiated by the mouth of two or three witnesses.¹ If this holds good in the case of earthly tribunals, how much more in the case of heavenly ones. Shall we then ‘make God a liar,’ and ‘not believe the record that He gave of His Son’? What hinders thee from joining the ranks of the true believers? Why standest thou aloof? Why dost thou reverence the Person of Jesus Christ, and yet refuse to believe that He

¹ St. Matt. xviii. 16: ‘But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ See also Deut. xvii. 6, and xix. 15.

is thy Redeemer? Because thou art lacking in one thing; for even though there should be numberless witnesses, even though the living God Himself should give thee signs and wonders manifold, thou wouldest not be convinced as long as thou hadst not experienced the special and peculiar power which these witnesses must exercise on thee *personally* until they had forced thee to confess with Jeremiah, 'Thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed.'¹

For herein is the essential difference between Divine witness and that which is merely human. I can compel a man by means of subtle reasoning and incontrovertible proofs to acknowledge the force of an argument; I can also, by the unanswerable proof of fact, convince a man of the truth, for example, that the three angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles, or that the earth is round in shape; but I cannot, in the domain of mental understanding, bring a man to the conviction that he is in need of a Saviour, and that Christ is that Saviour. The intellect is not equipped with sufficient power to comprehend this; other means are required, other powers must exercise their sway, before this can be brought home to man. Whether he humbly and gratefully accepts the witness of the Holy Spirit or refuses it; whether he regards the testimony of God as stronger than any other, in spite of what men may say; or whether he prefers to 'make

¹ Jer. xx. 7.

God a liar'—this is not a matter of his intellectual capacity, but of his inner spiritual attitude: it is a matter of will-power in which all the spiritual faculties take part. St. John expresses it thus: 'He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness *in himself*.' This belief is not a thing which we regard as true from the evidence of probability—that would be nothing more than a mental opinion—but it is the act of self-abandonment to, and trust in, the Son of God; it is the willing obedience to His commands—the conscious, deliberate opening out of the heart to the influence of the Holy Ghost. To him who believes, this witness of Holy Scripture is not only outward and visible, but in the power of the Holy Spirit it becomes to him an *inward conviction*, a personal possession, part of his very self; and therefore every man who believes, and who consequently offers himself, body, soul, and spirit, as a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice to God, receives from Him the gift of *eternal life*; for 'this life is in His Son,' and 'he that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son hath not life.'

We all feel that these are solemn and very precious words. Even he that does not understand them has a presentiment of their immeasurable significance. Yes, we all sigh in our intense longing to understand them more fully, to grasp their whole meaning, and treasure it in the depth of our hearts.

God has given us the sense of eternity even here on earth. It is the great secret and the hidden

power of this fleeting life. He has granted to us the knowledge of *eternal* life—a life which does not cease with this, which does not decline when this draws near its close ; a life replete with unending development, inspiring vigour even when the outer man is decaying and approaching dissolution ; a life which sheds forth brilliant light when death seems to be darkening all around.

Sometimes we meet people who have the impress of inner peace—a bright joyfulness, a childlike contentment, a courage in adversity, patience in tribulation, love to their fellows, and fearlessness in death. We look up to them in reverent amazement. What is the secret which causes their life so to differ from ours ? It is that through the dark veil of the earthly there gleams the splendour of the eternal life. And would ye see the full magnificence and glory of this eternal life ? Behold it, then, in His Son—in Jesus Christ ! In Him is the life eternal. In His silent obedience to the will of God He reveals to the petulant and impatient world a loveliness and a beauty of which it knows nothing. He stands there pure, in a world of impurity ; He lives in sweet accord with the will of God, while the world jars discordantly in disobedience ; He is full of peace in the midst of strife, full of holy joy in all His sorrow, hidden in the fellowship of the Father, while all without is tumult and unrest. Thus He shows to a sorrow-girt world the reality of eternal life in His own blessed Person. So

powerful is this life in the holy form of the Son of God that every word He utters is *life*; so completely has it possessed Him that His very death was the victory of eternal life.

And 'he that hath the Son hath life'; for Christ is not merely a great reformer, whose words are echoed by thousands of followers, but He is the Head of renovated humanity, greater—infinitely greater—than the first Adam. He is the Vine Who nourishes the branches with His own never-failing strength.¹ He is the grain of corn which lives in more beautiful form after death.² He is for us not only a great religious prophet, but He is the Head Who guides us, the members of His Body, the Church;³ with His Word and Sacraments He nourishes and strengthens us, and gives us renewed life; He is among His faithful ones wheresoever they are gathered together in His name;⁴ He lifts them up upon the wings of faith; He gives strength to the weary, rest to the heavy-laden, power of sanctification to the weak and tempted, courage to the fearful—to all He gives the vigour of life from above. He brings peace and joy and happiness—all that makes existence holy and rich—into our transient life here on earth. 'This is the witness of God which He hath testified of His Son' through the Spirit, viz., the witness borne of Him, 'Who came by

¹ St. John xv. 4, 5.

² St. John xii. 24.

³ Col. i. 18: 'He is the head of the body, the Church.'

⁴ St. Matt. xviii. 20: 'For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.'

water and blood.' There can be no testimony more powerful, and no other is needed. He who stands in the sun's rays needs no proof that the sun is shining; he has more than proof: he has the *experience* of it. He who bears within himself the life of Christ needs no further proof that salvation is given to him; he lives in a world of *life* as long as he lives in the faith of Christ. It is the Spirit of God Himself Who daily witnesses to this. Every prayer, every happiness, every joyful obedience to the will of God, every hour of peace, every new experience and conviction of forgiven sin—all testify to the living power of Christ within us, in His Holy Spirit. The more earnestly man clings to his Saviour in faith, the more real and visible does eternal life become to him; the more genuine his sanctification is, the more do all earth's fading pleasures lose their charm. With the blessed hope of eternal life before him, he loses all delight in those childish, foolish fancies which, after all, are the best the world has to offer. This personal experience is wrought in man through those witnesses of God, of which St. John speaks in the verses we have been considering. Whosoever has felt their power has been brought to declare with the prophet: 'Thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed.'¹

And now two questions force themselves upon us with irresistible power:

Have *we* this life?

¹ Jer. xx. 7.

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Have we this *faith* in the Son of God?

Whose heart does not beat faster in face of such questions? Ah, truly we have often longed for this faith. We have often seen it in the distance; sometimes we have grasped it; but has it remained with us? Does the Son of God abide continuously in us? Has the life which flows out from Christ vivified us and overcome our selfishness and weakness? Is the impress of eternal life visible in us as in our Saviour? Who dares do otherwise than humbly bow his head in the consciousness of his own helplessness and sinfulness?

But, Christians, courage.

Mark two things:

Firstly, the door of eternal life is opened to us through Jesus Christ; as long as it is 'to-day'¹ it shall not be closed. Whether we are young or old, whether we obey the Gospel or not, *now* is the accepted time, *now* let us hasten, hungering and thirsting, that we may be filled with the gift of eternal life.

Secondly, it is in *our* hands; upon *us* it depends whether we win this life. The way to win it is this: *to believe on the Son of God.*

Lay to heart in all honesty the solemn demands that God's word makes upon thee; and when in the light of the Bible thou hast learned to know thyself, then go in deepest contrition to the foot of thy Saviour's cross. There realize both thine

¹ Heb. iii. 13, 14.

own sinfulness and the grace and loving mercy of God, which is greater than the guilt of man, and which can take away all thy sin.

As in the natural life, so in the eternal, there is development. It begins silently, unseen, unfelt; it expands and increases with thy growing faith, *but*, at every stage of its development must the words ring out: 'He that *believeth* hath life.'

XVI.

PRAYER ACCORDING TO THE WILL OF GOD.

‘These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God ; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God. And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us: and if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him.’—I JOHN v. 13-15.

WE have reached the concluding division of our epistle. ‘These things’—namely, all that precedes—‘have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God.’ Thus does the Apostle commence, in order to sum up in three great thoughts the whole object of his writing :

Firstly, that by their faith in the Son of God they may be certain of the gift of eternal life, and joyful in the knowledge of answered prayer ;

Secondly, that they should continue in brotherly love, and by their intercessions gain the erring ; and

Thirdly, that they should guard themselves from the seductive power of the world and its idols.

We are concerned in the present chapter with

the first of these thoughts only, for it demands our special attention.

The Apostle sees a proof of the certainty of eternal life, which is given us in Christ Jesus, in the blessed confidence that God will hear our prayers if we ask anything 'according to His will.'

According to His will. You can understand that these words, applied to our prayers, must give them an altogether Divine character, and not only that, but they also insure absolutely that our prayers will be heard, for the Apostle is describing to his hearers his personal experience. A prayer 'according to His will.' Herein lies the explanation of so much which appears dark and inexplicable in our life of prayer. The words contain nothing less than the measure of the value of our prayers, the explanation why so often our prayers are not answered, and why they cannot be. They point to the way in which we can become partakers of God's mighty promises and blessings, which, according to the Bible, are the rewards of genuine, earnest prayer. The Church bears witness to, and the experience of the faithful confirms, the truth of what St. John here says.

Let us then concentrate our thoughts upon this subject of *prayer according to the will of God.*

I.

‘This is,’ says the Apostle, ‘the confidence that we have in Him,’ and it is the sign of a living faith, ‘that if we ask anything according to His will He heareth us.’

To be sure, at first sight, the addition ‘according to His will’ (which we have just seen to be of the greatest importance) would appear to be self-understood. For how can Almighty God be compelled to grant petitions which are *not* according to His will? Can we conceive of our eternal holy God as being like the unjust judge (to whom our Lord pointed as being so utterly different from our merciful God) who is compelled against his will to do a righteous act, in order that he may be rid of the poor woman and her importunate worrying?¹ Is God’s great will like man’s, weak and shifting, which is changed at every turn, dependent often upon his frame of mind, and scarcely ever to be trusted? Of all this there can be no question, and therefore the fact permits of no doubt that God cannot answer prayers which are not according to His will. God cannot be false to Himself.

But, dear Christians, obvious as all this is from our Father’s point of view, those little words, ‘according to His will,’ are for us profoundly solemn when we regard them as the test of the reality of our prayers. We can, we do

¹ St. Luke xviii. 2—5.

pray *not* according to the will of God. Let us examine our prayers in the light of the Apostle's words.

Thou, mother, who by the sick-bed of thy child hast pleaded in heart-felt accents for the life of thy loved one; thou, father, who with burning prayer hast prayed for the welfare of all who are near and dear to thee—how did ye know that these prayers were according to the will of God, that they were in agreement with His holy purposes? Thou man of fortune, who art ever asking for this one thing, that all thy days on earth may be happy, without sorrow and tears, without anxiety and worry; or thou, sorrowful and weary man, who daily prayest that at least this cup may be taken from thee, how knowest thou that thy request is according to the will of God, or in keeping with His holy intentions? And if thou couldst but lift thyself above thy little life, and pray that thy country might be preserved from danger, that the Church might be protected from all evil, even then, what certainty couldst thou have that this would be in accordance with God's holy will, and that thou wast offering up prayer acceptable to Him?

And now go deeper in thy self-examination; leave the *form* of thy various requests, and peer into the depths of thy soul whence all thy petitions come. Think of the prayer that thou didst utter yesterday, to-day, the very last prayer that thou didst offer up; look into its contents, consider its

innermost character. What! those thoughtless prayers, which did not even move thine *own* heart and will, those prayers of habit, from which no spark of fervour rose up to the throne of God, those selfish demands, wherewith thou didst but seek thine own advantage, that solitary cry of a soul, long since unaccustomed to intercourse with God, but which was yet not ashamed to call upon Him when every other expedient had been in vain—should such be prayers according to the will of God? Nay, the Christian's prayer is a mightier thing than this. Prayer is action, which must seize and overpower the innermost soul of man. Ah, it is terrible to say so, but none the less true—what thousands of prayers are daily offered up, and how few among them are really prayers according to the will of God! What, then, is required in order that we may learn to pray 'according to His will'?

The Apostle gives the answer to this in the first verse of the passage before us. He says that the confidence which makes us earnest and devout in our prayers is due to the fact that 'ye, who believe on the name of the Son of God, know that ye have eternal life.' It is the *person* of him who prays, not the nature of the prayer, which is the deciding factor. Child-like prayer assumes a child-like spirit. Only he is capable of praying according to the will of God whose faith in Jesus Christ assures him that he has *eternal life*.

It is the same thought which we considered in

the last chapter :¹ God has given to us the eternal life which is in His Son. ‘ He that hath the Son hath life.’² He speaks of a life which ceases not in death, and which therefore does *not commence* beyond the grave, but which sanctifies and transforms our present fleeting life with its God-given power ; and this unending life, so he testifies, shall be possessed by those who believe on the name of the Son of God.

Ye Christians, who call yourselves by His name, and who confess His name as the only one whereby we can be saved,³ I ask you, What is your Saviour to you? Thou answerest: He is my pattern, I follow in His footsteps, because I know that in following Him I walk in the way of peace and salvation. Thou answerest: He directs me in the right path; He reveals to me, who am poor and miserable, the light of Divine truth and of eternal love as never man did yet. Thou sayest: Nay, He is more than this: He is my Redeemer, in Whom God Himself inclines to me; He heals my wounds; He comforts me in sorrow; He calms my conscience; He promises to me forgiveness of my sins. Thou sayest: He is to me my living Lord, my Saviour, Who in Word and Sacrament comes close to me through His Holy Spirit, and gives me strength to stand firm in my conflict with sin and the world and death. And to this I

¹ P. 205.

² 1 John v. 12.

³ Acts iv. 12: ‘ There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.’

reply that all that thou hast said, every gift and grace of Jesus Christ which thou canst think of, is contained in those short words of St. John : (‘ In Him ye have *eternal life.*’)

‘ Ye know,’ he wrote, ‘ that ye have eternal life.’ It has become a reality in your hearts. Blessed readers of whom the Apostle could say this ! And yet the words hold good for all. If ye cleave faithfully and sincerely to Jesus Christ, trusting Him to Whom ye belong, through Whom ye would inherit everlasting salvation, then ye have actually and really ‘ eternal life ’ abiding in you. Of course, ye are still living in this visible, decaying world—it must be so ; it is the field of labour wherein God has placed you ; it is the school wherein ye are educated for your future *life*—but ye are not, cannot be, content with this world only ; your souls find no lasting satisfaction here. The object for which ye live, the power which gives you life, neither of these belongs to this transitory, unstable world : they belong to eternity. The faithfulness with which ye fulfil your duties, not for man’s, but for God’s, sake ; the love which ye show forth in order to be freed from self, and to become like your Saviour, Who gave His life for you ; the patient humility with which ye bear your cross until God takes it from you—all these, however marred and incomplete through the weakness of your mortal nature, are nevertheless glimpses and reflections of that eternal life, which even on this earth the heart of man possesses ; and whoso-

ever has this eternal life which flows out from Christ is able in all confidence to pray *according to the will of God*.

(For if man himself is well-pleasing unto God, through his faith in the Son of God, then his prayer will also be well-pleasing unto God. It is impossible for a Christian who has this Divinely-generated life in his soul to pray contrary to the will of God.) Behold thyself in thy private chamber. Before it is possible for thee to pray earnestly, must thou not first ask thyself the solemn questions whether the will of God is holding sway in thy heart, whether thou art harbouring any thought contrary to His will, whether His influence is unchecked in thy soul? Not as though it were forbidden to any child of man to make any requests, however simple, or to pour out his griefs and worries, whatsoever they may be, whether he pray for his child's recovery, or for relief of bodily pain, or for protection against danger—these prayers, too, are all accepted; but when the life which is of Christ really rules in our hearts, all our prayers and desires will eventually be formulated after the pattern of the prayer which He Himself offered to the Father: 'Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine, be done.'¹ Ever again will our requests and supplications come back to the one prayer that God's kingdom may come, that His will may be done, and that His Holy Spirit may be poured out upon us and upon

¹ St. Luke xxii. 42.

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all flesh; we shall become more and more possessed of the conviction that, if we pray for anything which is not according to His will, the request is not one which will help us in the way of peace and of salvation, and that therefore there can be no better prayer for us than to commit ourselves wholly and unreservedly into His hands, and say: 'May Thy holy will ever rule my heart, for Thy love and mercy are infinite.'

We know, alas! that as long as we are on this earth those awful hours of conflict will return again and again—hours in which our weak faith, our foolishness and fear, will be offended at the inflexible sternness of God's holy ways; hours in which doubt raises its head and says, 'God *cannot* require that,' or in which mad wilfulness cries, 'God *may not* demand that'; for as long as we are on this earth there must be battles, and as long as faith is not perfected, dark and terrible hours must be faced. But if this faith does not give way, and if we look up to the Author and Finisher of our faith,¹ prepared to give up our own wills in obedience to His, then we shall always find the strength to pray according to the will of God, and we shall be partakers of that blessing of *answered prayer* which belongs to all who pray aright.

¹ Heb. xii. 2.

II.

‘And if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him.’ St. John speaks of an *immediate* answer to prayer; it is not the promise of some future act with which he seeks to give comfort. If God accepts our prayers, it is certain that He answers them. The prayer, its acceptance and its answer, all belong together. Can there be a richer, greater promise?

But I seem to hear, in answer to this question, not the joyful reply that there can be no greater blessing, but rather an objection: ‘If we pray *according to His will* He hears us. Yes, but that is taking away with one hand what is promised with the other, for if I pray only according to *His will*, then *my* request is not heard; and if *my* prayer is always to give way to His will, then, after all, it is immaterial what I ask for; *my* prayer is of no importance; no miracles are wrought by prayer so far as I am concerned.’ Is this objection justifiable?

I reply first of all to the last thought in this argument. Certainly miracles are wrought even nowadays; God will perform them to-day, and in answer to thy prayer. He will save thy soul, if it is in accordance with His holy purposes, in such a manner that it will appear as nothing less than miraculous to thee; nevertheless, this much of thy objection is true, namely, that it *is* only

prayer which is in accordance with His holy will that can be accepted and blessed. But, I ask in return, is this such a small matter or so unimportant? *What* do I pray for? What can I, what may I, ask for without ceasing, which is according to His will?

In the first place, it is a matter of absolutely no doubt that the Divine Will is occupied with my salvation.¹ That I, miserable man that I am, should be saved, is a matter of God's holy care. This has been the case ever since I was born, and even before that, in the counsel and foreknowledge of God. In order that He may save my soul He preserves my life, giving me breath; He counts every hair of my head, He guards over me, and makes me the object of His saving grace; therefore every prayer which I offer up for my sanctification and salvation must be in accordance with His holy will. And what numberless gifts of grace are here offered to view! Let the attainment of these be the subject of our prayers. Pray that thou mayest gain a living faith, that thou mayest continue in that faith; pray that His purposes may be fulfilled in thee; pray that thy repentance may be sincere, and that His grace be not in vain; pray that thou mayest have, not only a distant view of eternal life, but that it may flow in full measure into thy drooping soul; pray for all this with

¹ I Tim. ii. 4: 'Who will have *all men* to be saved.'

deepest fervour, and if thou have but a spark of faith, God will incline His ear unto thee; thou wilt receive what thou prayest for, thou wilt have life of His life. The growing need of His sanctifying grace, the yearning for His fellowship, the certainty that there can be no peace apart from God, the joy of praying, which comes from earnest prayer, the increasing anxiety for thy soul's welfare—all this is the answer to thy prayers. I ask: Is this a small matter?

Furthermore, it is certain that God's will is that thou shouldst be sanctified. He would not that the great price paid should be in vain. He desires not that the good work begun in thee should remain uncompleted. He wishes to place thee under the discipline of His Holy Spirit, in order that it may be difficult for thee to fall away again. (Therefore every prayer which thou prayest for thy sanctification is a prayer according to the will of God, and consequently accepted. What a subject for prayer is revealed to thee here! Think of thy endless temptations, and make them a subject of prayer. *One* sin more than all others cleaves to thee, pursues thee; it is a stumbling-block which thou canst not overcome, but which hinders thy spiritual life from blossoming and bringing forth fruit. Pray over and over again to be rid of this; pray when the temptation comes, pray when it has passed; make everything a subject of prayer, every little break in thy relationship to God, every angry

word and petulant thought; continue steadfast in such prayer.

By means of prayer let thy intercourse with others be made holy, especially with those who are difficult to get on with, unloving, mocking in their behaviour, or unbelieving. Remember them when thou art praying, and bring their names in love before the throne of God. Place thy calling, with its dangers and cares and anxieties, under the protection of prayer, and in that moment in which thou doest this in faith, thou wilt receive what thou hast prayed for; thou wilt feel God's holy presence, thou wilt perceive His living strength in thee. Prayer and sanctification are as closely connected as cause and effect. I knew a young man who had got into wild ways, but in the evil company in which he found himself he saw the warning from his God, and before he could put his thoughts into the form of prayer, God had saved him from sin—that was answer to prayer. Or I picture to myself an ill-tempered, sensitive, and ambitious man, to whom an injury has been done; but he bears it in silence, he renounces his rights for the sake of peace, he speaks well of him by whom he has been injured, because he longs to walk in the footsteps of his Saviour, who has forbidden us to take revenge—that, too, is answer to prayer. And I ask again: Is this a small matter?

It is certain that God's holy will is exercised in setting up His kingdom on earth, and in purifying

and building up His Church. He regards not only thee, but also the world which is to be gained for His kingdom. Thou art a citizen of His kingdom, and therefore responsible for its growth and increase. Thou art hastening its advent in sanctifying thyself. Thou must help by thy labour on behalf of others. If the anxiety of our times, the unbelief of men, the enmity of adversaries, make thy intercession a duty, be sure thy prayers are heard, even though thou see it not. In the triumphant course of God's kingdom, which we shall some day follow from the heights of eternity, the intercessions of faithful Christians have a holy part to fill ; and in the increasing happiness which we feel in working for its establishment on earth, in the joyful experience of being fellow-workers with our God, and in the wide Christian sympathy which mourns and rejoices with the sorrows and joys of the whole world, we have proof of the unseen power of the prayers of the saints—the certainty that our intercessions are not without avail. Is this a small matter ?

And, finally, shall our outer life be excluded from the promises ? I can never agree with the opinion of those who believe in God's almighty power in the domain of the spiritual, and who nevertheless cannot believe that He exercises the same power in the affairs of our outward, natural life. No, if it is God's will to sanctify and save thy little life, then it must also be His will to care for and protect thee in thy natural life. He

counts the very hairs upon thy head ; He guides the falling stone, lest it should wound thee. He Who gives the greater will not refuse the less. True enough, whether this inner man is to be prepared for the Divine life by sickness or health, by wealth or poverty, by quiet or unrest—that we know not ; therefore it is not fitting that we should approach God with *our* proposals and plans, but rather must we bow our heads in humble submission to His will. It is sufficient for me to know, without any doubt, that He will do what is right, and what is best for me, and what will most conduce to His honour and glory. He forbids it not that I should come to Him in all humility, with my supplications and wishes, and that I should pour out my heart to Him, when His ways appear dark and incomprehensible to me. Just as a child modestly utters its word of immature wisdom, so may also the child of God bring before Him its childish thoughts and petitions ; but it may not regard its feeble prayers as better than the wisdom of God, but must humbly resign itself into His hands, when He orders things otherwise. When this is done, then it may be said that even such childish prayers are answered.

The prayer of the Son of God in Gethsemane was not in vain ; no prayer offered up in faith is vain. God may refuse to use the means which I propose, for He knows what is best, just as a doctor refuses to allow me to take the medicine I

prefer, because he knows there are better ways to cure me. God may refuse me if to-day I ask for some special thing, but He does it in order that He may give me something better, something I ought to pray for always and above all things, viz., that His will may be done, that His kingdom may come, and that I may at last go to my long rest in peace. So now I ask once more: Is this all a small matter?) ✓

‘We have the petitions that we desired of Him.’ Perhaps we have them immediately; perhaps we must ask a hundred times before they are granted. Thou receivest according to thy faith. God lays upon the wings of prayer no more than they are able to bear. When they can bear more thou wilt receive more. In the matter of temporal wants, as in the domain of spiritual, it is a question of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and these gifts are only given in proportion to our faith, and are only retained in proportion to our faith. Only that which thou takest in faith and gratitude from the hand of God is really thine. Pray for an ever-increasing faith, that the invisible world of prayer into which thou desirest to penetrate may become a home to thee, that its ways may become more familiar to thee, its mysteries more comprehensible. And thus to know that invisible world in the midst of this visible one, to gain from it new strength and new ideals, to live thus in eternity while still sojourning here on earth—can the life of poor mortal man possibly be raised higher? Is

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it a small thing to know of such a world, and to be assured of entry into it? But the key which unlocks the portal of that world is prayer *according to the will of God*.

Before I end let me put this question: Art thou a man of prayer? Very likely not a soul will answer 'No'; but there may be many a one amongst us whom the distractions of the world, doubt, and the sins of his life have separated so far from God that he scarcely knows what prayer really is, and his relationship to God is broken. Then renew this bond by means of heart-felt prayer. Renew it to-day. Seize the hand of God stretched out to thee—seize it in faith, seize it in prayer. Whatever power of prayer thou still possessest, use it, no matter how weak it be. Pray at least, 'Lord, teach me to pray according to Thy will.' Turn again to God; surrender all thy thoughts, thy doing and striving, into the hands of His Holy Spirit, that thou mayest in no way resist His will; and until in the depths of thy heart the great 'Amen' resounds, continue steadfast, and repeat again and again the cry of the patriarch of old: 'I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me.'¹

¹ Gen. xxxii. 26.

XVII.

INTERCESSION ACCORDING TO THE WILL OF GOD.

‘If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.’—I St. JOHN v. 16, 17.

ONCE more, at the close of his Epistle, St. John touches the great subject which he has again and again spoken of—love of the brethren; but he imparts new meaning to it by connecting it in the closest possible manner with the preceding subject of prayer.

We spoke in the last chapter of prayer according to the will of God. ‘This is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything *according to His will*, He heareth us.’ Let us now consider the subject of *intercession*, and how it is to be offered up according to the will of God.

‘According to the will of God.’ This must form an important part of our present subject too. As the real secret of acceptable *prayer* is contained in these words, so, too, do they give us the clue to acceptable *intercession* in the sight of God. Just

as a prayer which is not offered up in accordance with the will of God is unfruitful, so also intercession, when it is not well-pleasing to God, will not be blessed. Of intercession as of prayer it holds good that neither can be of any avail unless they are built upon the foundation of Christian life. Without this each is but an empty form.

I.

I repeat that prayer can only be efficacious when it is offered up by one who is living a Christian life. Therefore, what the *soul* of Christian life is, must also be the *soul* of the life of prayer, viz., brotherly love. Thus prayer, when rightly offered, becomes naturally an intercession; and, on the other hand, intercession is only possible where brotherly love is real.

But this general statement receives at the hand of the Apostle a much more definite character: 'If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask,' or *pray*. We have, no doubt, frequently offered up intercessions for others, perhaps by a sick-bed, and in deep sympathy we have prayed: 'Grant him a restful night, and peace from all his sufferings.' Or perhaps the hopeless difficulties in which a brother is involved have made us intercede for him: 'Grant that this cup may pass from him; grant to him light and comfort and peace.'

And without doubt St. John would regard such

intercessions as natural. He would be the first to offer them up. Notwithstanding, he does not even mention intercession of this kind in the passage before us, for his object is to lay stress on something more important still: 'If any man see his brother sin a sin not unto death, he shall ask'—he will ask of his own accord, he needs not to be told to, he cannot do otherwise if he is a Christian. A brother's *sin* must move the Christian's heart far more deeply than his worldly troubles, or pain and sickness. Intercession according to the will of God is not prayer for outward prosperity or material welfare, but for the sin, for the soul's welfare, of our brethren. Observe the conditions which the Apostle lays down in urging upon us the duty of intercessory prayer.

There must be, first of all, a stern moral sense. 'If any man see *his brother sin* a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask.' If the *sin* of a brother leads anyone to intercede for him, without doubt he must regard sin as something terrible. May we not see here a reason why so few genuine intercessions are offered up? Alas! men seem scarcely to realize any more what sin is, as though, with the exception of theft and murder, there were nothing to which this word would apply. When one sees with what incredible indifference men regard sin, even in their nearest relatives, one can understand how impossible it is for most people to offer up intercessions for the

sins of others. For example, a father raises no objection to the disgraceful life his son is leading, provided his sin compromises nobody but himself, and provided that he keeps within the bounds of the debased code of morals which is in vogue in the circle of his acquaintance. Where is the realization of sin here? And where is the possibility of intercession in such a tainted atmosphere as this? If *sin* is to be the cause of my intercession, then I dare not excuse sin; I dare not myself find secret pleasure in it. I must regard sin with holy horror, as something which is terrible, as something which plunges men into perdition without hope of rescue. I must learn, with St. Paul, that 'whatsoever is not of faith is *sin*.'¹ Yes, I must learn, and be convinced that, according to the Apostle, there is indeed a 'sin unto death.' And now ask thyself: Are thy intercessions the outcome of this solemn view of sin?

But at the side of the Apostle's sternness a wondrous love and gentleness appears. 'If any man see his brother sin,' what is he to do? Abuse him, punish, judge, condemn, despise him? Of course, that would be *our* first impulse—we have done that hundreds of times. But the Apostle bids us first hurry into our secret closet and pray. This erring one is a brother. The passion that held him, the deceit which mastered him, the incontinency which caused him to sin—these all are not only guilt, but also distress, calamity,

¹ Rom. xiv. 23.

danger to the soul, danger for its eternal welfare. The less *he* feels this, the more ought *we* to; the more we realize God's long-suffering and forbearance towards us, the more merciful and patient must we be with him.

If thou lovest his soul, that eternal soul in him, then lift up thy hands in interceding prayer for him. See, that is what thy child lacked, however great thy love for it—the father's prayer on behalf of his little one. This is what makes marriage so sad, so joyless, however much one may admire the other. There is lacking the earnestness, the welding power, of the love which intercedes. A holy tie is wanting in thy family circle; the strongest link is wanting in our Church life; the indissoluble joint is wanting in the common life of our country. In each case it is because we lack that love which feels the brother's guilt as though it were its own, the love which cannot do otherwise than pray for his need, and intercede with the great Helper, Who alone can take away his sins. When flames threaten the life of a fellow-creature, who would not help to save him? And when the wild flames of sin flare up in a human heart, should there be no hand stretched out to help, but only Cain's wicked subterfuge, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'¹ Ye Christians, have ye in your hearts this interceding love?

But the Apostle points to a third matter, which should stir our innermost heart: 'If any man

¹ Gen. iv. 9.

see his brother sin . . . he shall ask' (better 'he will pray') 'for him.' As we have already seen, St. John looks upon this as natural; he knows of no other course than that of pleading with a loving God, Who answers prayer. But there is first this question to be answered: How about thine *own* sins? Dost thou bring them before the throne of God that they may be forgiven? Or art thou content to live in sin, lust, falsehood, worldliness, as though it were not transgression, guilt, an insult in the sight of the living God? Wouldst thou dare, thus polluted, to bring thy brother's guilt to the altar of God? Thou wouldst blush at thine own hypocrisy! Oh, Christians, we lack that faith which knits us in holy fellowship with the invisible God! We lack that 'fear of the Lord' which knows that guilt calls forth the just judgment of God—for He cannot behold sin, it separates us from Him eternally; we lack that anxiety for our soul's welfare which should never leave us in peace until we are assured of forgiveness. Interceding love can only thrive where there is deep inner piety, and genuine piety can only be found among those to whom the smallest sin is hateful—among those whose whole life is disciplined by the knowledge that God's all-seeing eye is ever upon them. Only when this is the case can a man offer up true, earnest, and *efficacious* prayer for his brother. Thou who wouldst pray for thy brother, dost thou fulfil this indispensable condition?

II.

But intercession according to the will of God has also certain limitations. God can, without doubt, through His love and omnipotence, answer the *prayers* of man how and when He will; but He *cannot* answer the *intercessions* of man in every case. For His omnipotence has itself placed limitations to this in the freedom which He has granted to men. So great is this freedom which has been given to us, that it is often the cause of hindering and annulling the intercessions which we offer up for our brethren. Where the possibility of answer to intercession is precluded through the wilful wickedness of him for whom we pray, when the object of our intercession stubbornly refuses to be saved, there the obligation of intercessory prayer is cancelled. 'If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask' ('pray'), 'and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death'; but then the Apostle continues: 'There is a sin unto death; I do not say that he shall pray for it.' Who can hear these words, dear friends, without fixing his mind immediately on the terrible question: What is this 'sin unto death'?

The context shows what St. John is referring to. It is the sin which brings *death* in its train, that is, *the ceasing of spiritual life*. It is the sin from which there is no release, which makes repentance impossible, which bars the way to con-

version, because the *life* which inspires penitence and contrition is *gone*. It is the sin which makes the turning away from good an accomplished, irrevocable fact, and which in consequence quenches all desire for forgiveness. For where the possibility of repentance and faith has vanished, it is inconceivable that the righteous and holy God can forgive sin. When man has fallen to this awful depth the instinct of accepting forgiveness has become obliterated. The Apostle does not utter harsh and uncharitable words here. The eternal Truth Himself spoke of a sin which would not be forgiven either in this world or the next.¹ And all the Apostles teach the same. If thou wouldst comfort thyself with all the promises the Bible gives, thou darest not refuse to believe the judgments which it speaks of. Though many a man in these days of lax religious belief may repudiate the idea of eternal perdition, yet when he comes face to face with this thought, must he not tremblingly ask with the Apostles: 'Is it I?'² Am I free from this sin unto death?

It is not a question of any single, definite sin, which St. John would brand as unforgivable, for is there any sin on earth to which the prophet's words would not apply: 'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool'³

¹ St. Matt. xii. 31, 32.

² St. Matt. xxii. 26.

³ Isa. i. 18.

If it were a question of some *one* failing, how comparatively easy it would be to make a special point of coping with it. But we are dealing with something more terrible than this. The sanctification of which thou partakest, thy power to pray, thy Divine childhood, the forgiveness of thy sins, thy hope of salvation—all this is no absolute for-ever-assured possession; it must be daily appropriated afresh through self-discipline and self-oblation.

No day passes without *some* sins, be they evil thoughts, angry words, or some wrong act, and these have to be washed away every day through the grace of repentance and forgiveness. And the necessity of this holy possession being thus daily renewed proves the possibility of our losing it altogether, as when a man neglects his sanctification and sins in spite of grace. And therefore it is possible for a Christian, though he has received the gift of grace, and knows the power of eternal truth in Jesus Christ, to fall back into his old, fatal sins. How many there are whose love in the springtide of life bore no fruit in the autumn harvest because the summer heat of sin's onslaughts caused them to faint! It is possible that through some one sin—for example, carnal lust—the Divine life is quenched beyond recall. But much oftener it is that the inner life decays and dies through long-continued carelessness and neglect. Truly God leaves no man without many earnest warnings; but woe to him who, in spite of them,

disregards his pricking conscience, and sins anew against His grace; falsehood and wrong then master his inner being, ever weaker and feebler becomes his power to pray. But then even the irreparable step has not been taken; even at the last hour it is possible for him to rise, to take hold of faith anew, though it cost him many a bitter struggle; still the warning Voice urges him to turn, to seek peace and forgiveness. Perhaps, alas! there is but *one* more temptation needed in order to make his fall into the abyss irretrievable. It may be that this one sin will quench the last remaining spark, and harden his heart for ever against the pleading voice of his Saviour. But it will do more: it will change his *disregard* for the truth into active *hate*—hate not only for the truth, but for God Himself. Conscious obduracy—this is the ‘sin unto death’; and—terrible thought—the higher a man has stood, the purer his spiritual life has been, the nearer will his fall bring him to that sin which is the ‘sin unto death.’ Those who are in most danger of falling into this sin are not the sinners to whom the world points with scorn, but the religious, the pious ones among us!

Concerning this sin St. John writes: ‘I do not say that he shall pray for it.’ He does not command us to do so. He *cannot* command it, because he has received no promise from God that He will vouchsafe an answer to this prayer. As sure as it is that there is a difference between the sin of Judas and the sin of St. Peter, so sure is it

that there is a difference between the sins for which we are to make intercession.

But mark well : St. John does not *forbid* intercession even for this sin. He dare not. Not even can he give a certain sign whereby to identify this most awful sin in man. God alone, ' who trieth the very hearts and reins,'¹ can know that. Our Saviour prayed for His murderers. St. John spoke of Him as having died ' for the sins of the whole world ' ;² then let *thy* love be as deep as thy Saviour's, and let thy intercession be as deep as thy love.

We, with our narrow hearts, may think a sinner lost, but God knows otherwise. Though one appear to us wholly hardened, God may yet find a soft spot through which He will enter into his heart. Especially in our times, when hate and blasphemy are so rampant that we feel inclined

¹ Ps. vii. 10, P.B.V.

² I St. John ii. 2. See also for the thought contained in this paragraph St. Augustine's ' Sermo ad Catechumenos,' edit. C. A. Heurtley, p. 119: ' Nemo dicat, " Illud feci, forte non mihi dimittitur." Quid fecisti? Quantum fecisti? Dic immane aliquid quod commisisti, grave, horrendum, quod etiam cogitare horres: quidquid vis feceris, numquid Christum occidisti? Non est factio aliquid pejus, quid et Christo nihil est melius. Quantum nefas est occidere Christum? Judæi tamen Eum occiderunt, et multi in Eum postea crediderunt, et biberunt Ejus sanguinem: dimissum est illius peccatum quod commiserunt. Cum baptizati fueritis, tenete ritam bonam in præceptis Dei, ut Baptismum custodiat is usque in finem. Non vobis dico quia sine peccato hic vivetis: sed sunt venialia, sine quibus vita ista non est. Propter omnia peccata Baptismus inventus est; propter levia, sine quibus esse non possumus, oratio inventa. Quid habet oratio? "*Dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris.*" Semel abluimur Baptismate, quotidie abluimur oratione. *Sed nolite illa committere, pro quibus necesse est ut a Christi corpore separemini: quod absit a vobis!*"—*Trans.*

to point to the Apostle's words, 'I do not say that he shall pray for it,' we need to remember that hate against Christians is not hate against Christ and Christianity. Especially in our days is it necessary that the truth should ever assume new forms, in order to gain those who stand afar off, and those who are bitter in their hate. It is just for these that the intercessions of Christians ought to rise up to heaven, in order that they may be brought to Christ, in order that the truth may triumph. For it is absolutely certain that, where the receptive spirit has not been quenched, where there is even one spark remaining, there the *power* of intercession may be manifested.

III.

Intercession, without doubt, exercises a great *power* over him who offers it; for the sweetest sacrifice that human love can bring before God is to plead for those it loves. As long as thy love does not do this, it is wanting in its highest, holiest attribute. Nothing makes love more gentle, more sympathetic, more self-sacrificing than when it stands before the throne of God and prays for others. And he who prays receives the first blessing, for he becomes more gentle, more loving, and more considerate in his intercourse with others. How can I offend a brother? How can I be a source of temptation to him? How

can I put a stumbling-block in his way, when I am praying that he may have strength, that he may overcome sin, that he may receive forgiveness of his sins? Thus, by means of intercessory prayer, thy whole bearing towards wife and child is changed for the better, thy intercourse with friends is kindlier, thy behaviour to those below thee is gentler and more considerate! Of necessity thy intercession exercises a hallowing power over thee.

But St. John refers not to this hallowing power in his words, 'If any man see his brother sin . . . he shall ask, and He shall give him life for them that sin not unto death.' He speaks of the blessing of intercession upon those for whom we pray. He shall give 'life,' he says. Truly the Apostle is right when he says, 'there is a sin not unto death.' There are sins of weakness, thoughtlessness, and carelessness in our inner life, and, in spite of them, the real aim of the soul is heavenwards.

We all experience that daily. There are even gross sins committed by those whose innermost heart nevertheless belongs to God. And yet it is true that every sin leads towards spiritual death; every sin *may* give the death-blow, if it is not destroyed through repentance and forgiveness. Every sin, as such, separates from God, if fellowship with Him is not re-established through faith and grace. Therefore, the Apostle is right in saying that the intercession which helps the brother to regain faith whereby he may seize

once more the hand of God, gives him life—life with and in God, that is, eternal life.

No man can possibly say *how* life flows into the soul of an erring brother through intercession; it is essentially a matter of faith. Only he who believes at all in the efficacy of prayer can believe in the power of intercession. But He who once said to St. Peter, ‘ I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not,’¹ required this faith not only in him, but in us all. But St. John, when speaking of intercession, had in mind, no doubt, those divine words of his Saviour which He uttered in the High-priestly prayer (St. John xvii.), words which are preserved to us only in the Gospel according to St. John: ‘ Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word.’²

The Apostle does not imply that there will be any visible and immediate wonder performed as the result of intercession. All works in a natural order. A son in distant lands, who knows that his father’s arm is not there to uphold, that his father’s glance is not there to guide, but who nevertheless believes that his father’s prayers are helping him and strengthening him—can you doubt that the knowledge of this intercession is a power which encompasses him and protects him? How many times has the thought of a loving mother at home wrestling in prayer been the means of saving an erring son from perdition!

¹ St. Luke xxii. 32.

² St. John xvii. 20.

The consciousness that intercessory prayer is being offered up for me is a power which arouses my slumbering conscience, which takes away the pleasure of sin, which disquiets the guilty heart, which opens the ear to the warnings of God, and which saves me from many a fall, perhaps from death. Let not our intercession be wanting for any, for it is a link in the chain which binds a man to God.

And if we can follow the working of intercession in this one respect, may we not conclude that there is a like working in *every* case? For genuine intercession is efficacious, though we very often perceive it not. A mysterious bond of union exists wherever the spirit of intercessory prayer is real and living. See thou to it that this bond be not snapped. Learn to intercede faithfully, earnestly, perseveringly. Despise not the power which God has placed within thy reach. Become a man of prayer, that thou mayest also become an interceder for thy brethren.

XVIII.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORLD.

‘We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not. And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.’—I JOHN v. 18-21.

WE have reached the last section of our Epistle. Once more let us remember its chief characteristics. It is a letter for the various Christian assemblies in Asia Minor. It has no systematic teaching on points of doctrine, like the Epistle to the Romans. The great thoughts which St. John wishes his hearers to meditate upon are written down without any attempt at formal arrangement. Though withdrawn from the world in holy contemplation of things Divine, his teaching is nevertheless of an eminently practical character. He impresses upon his readers the need of their Christianity being a *living fact*; he insists upon a pure walk in life, and upon the visible and outward expression

of brotherly love. As we have pointed out before, there is a certain monotony in the repeated emphasis which he lays upon the three great themes of his Epistle :

Walking in the light.

Love of the brethren.

The contrast between God and the world.

But each time he mentions these great subjects he brings new light to bear on them, and therefore each time there are new thoughts and new lessons to be learned from them ; and this is true also of the concluding words of the Epistle, for he gathers up the leading thoughts of what has gone before, in order to lay before his readers once more the fundamental truths of the Gospel ; so that in the passage before us there is nothing which has not already been touched upon. Nevertheless it contains something more than mere repetition. The fact of its being his final and concluding word gives it a character of peculiar solemnity. Its special subject is the great contrast between Christianity and the world ; and taking the Apostle's treatment of it as our guide, we shall divide our meditation into three parts :

1. How great the cleft is which separates Christians from the world !
2. How glorious the act of love is which has saved Christians from the world !
3. How solemn a duty it is not to fall back again into the bondage of the world !

I.

We must recollect that the subjects of our two preceding chapters were prayer and intercession according to the will of God. The Apostle taught us there that intercession has its limitations, as in the case of the man whose obdurate heart led him into the 'sin unto death.' It is the thought of the possibility of such limitation that leads him to emphasize with relentless severity the tremendous contrast between Christians who are 'begotten of God,' and the world which 'lieth in wickedness.' Were this contrast ever to lose its definite character, Christians would cease to be the 'salt of the earth'¹ and the 'light of the world.'² With all the impressiveness of a final warning, the aged Apostle urges upon his readers the solemn words: 'Whosoever is born of God sinneth not.'

'Sin' is the religious term for all that is bad. All evil is sin, but only he can recognise evil as sin who sees in his untruthfulness, in his temper, in his evil desires, a transgression against the Divine commands, an insult to the living God, a grieving of the Holy Spirit, Who seeks to work in his heart, and possess it. Only the man who knows God, and accepts His commandments, and has *experienced* His loving promises, can form any idea of how terrible sin is; and the more living this experience is, the more clearly he perceives the work of grace and the influence of the Holy

¹ St. Matt. v. 13.

² St. Matt. v. 14.

Spirit in his own heart, the more hateful and loathsome must sin of necessity appear to him. Sin becomes an actual impossibility to him. As the Apostle says : ' Whosoever is born of God sinneth not.'

Not that the Apostle requires or implies by these words perfect sinlessness. He would not contradict himself, and he wrote in the first chapter of his Epistle : ' If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.'¹ There can be no perfected saint on this earth. But what he means, of course, is that no child of God can *willingly*, of set purpose, insult and grieve its Father, Whom it loves ; it can find no pleasure in sin, but must regard it as a hindrance to life, as a heavy, disagreeable burden, which causes weariness and unhappiness and suffering. The man of God must know that anger, ambition, and lust are out of place in his heart, and must be fought against and overcome ; and therefore it must come to this, that the man of God cannot sin a ' sin unto death ' ; and so the Apostle's words are applicable to him when he writes : ' He that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and the wicked one toucheth him not.' He guards himself against sin as life guards itself against death ; even when he *suffers* sin, which ever cleaves to him, he nevertheless does not deliberately *commit* sin. The Wicked One finds in him no prey, for he has no power over him.

¹ 1 St. John i. 8.

And in contrast to such a child of God the Apostle points to the world, which 'lieth in wickedness.' The world in his sense is that part of the human race which is estranged from God. He makes no distinction between the civilized and the uncivilized, between the educated and the uneducated, between those of a high and those of a debased morality. Whether they be the refined Ephesians among whom he lived, or the wild Parthians, whom he perhaps saw being dragged through the streets as captives of war, his judgment is the same: they are the 'world.' Whether this 'world' is perishing in its restless rush after pleasure and wealth, or whether it rises in envious greed against the rich, matters not, for it 'lieth in wickedness,' bound and chained under the dominion of the Wicked One—*i.e.*, Satan—shut up in the kingdom of sin and darkness.

It is true that this 'world' is different now from that which the Apostle looked out upon. It has become Christianized. In our own country, at least, no one is outside the sphere of Christian influence, of Christian civilization. Great as the power of evil may be to-day, wickedness is not perpetrated so openly and shamelessly as was the case in St. John's time, in spite of its classic culture. One may even say, without fear of contradiction, that the world of to-day does not take the same delight in sin as was possible in the conditions of society in those days. The very worst man would not like to admit that there was abso-

lutely *no* good in him. But would the Apostle on this account alter his judgment? Ah no, for he would ask this seemingly moral and pious world if *it was really concerned in becoming holy, pure, and godly*. He would point out to it that, after all, its fundamental purpose was to live for itself, to live for gain and pleasure, *not* to live for others, least of all for God. And therefore, in spite of its elegant appearance, its clever deceptions, and its 'cloak of sparkling sheen,' he would pronounce the same judgment to-day as he did long ago: 'It lieth in wickedness,' estranged from God, hostile to God, lying prone in the kingdom of darkness. And upon us he would urge, as he did to his first readers, the need of realizing this tremendous contrast, and the need of applying its lesson to our own lives.

But just here lies the difficulty for us. For in this passage, again, as so often before, the Apostle's expression seems harsh and abrupt; he omits the intermediate steps between the two extremes. To which side dost thou belong? Hast thou in thyself the mark of Divine birth? Art thou one that 'sinneth not'? Or dost thou belong to the world, which 'lieth in wickedness'? How many of us find no answer to these questions, because we wish to avoid the two extremes implied in them, because we wish to find a *third* position, an intermediate place, where we might have both, God and the world. And this is just where the significance and importance of

the Apostle's words lie : for *there is no intermediate position* ; they bid us not deceive ourselves with false ideas ; they force us to a clear and definite view of the *real* state of things ; they urge us to make the final decision. Between God and sin there is a deep, deep gulf, which can never be bridged over. To belong to God and to serve the world are not two extremities of one plane, but they are contrasts, irreconcilable contrasts, between which there can be no possible connection. And this is the proof of whether thou dost realize the contrast : ' Whosoever is born of God sinneth not.' Art thou determined not to sin ? Art thou determined not to suffer a lie, not even in business, nor for the sake of policy ? Art thou determined to do nothing unseemly, even when no human eye is near to see, even when the deed is not punishable before human tribunals ? Art thou determined to abjure all evil desires as one born of God, and to battle against them in holy watchfulness ? Dost thou perceive within thyself, thou Divinely-begotten man, the hatred of sin and its intolerable load ? Oh, Christians, if this determination is not an element of your spiritual life, then take it as a sure proof that ye have not yet learned the significance of that terrible contrast of which the Apostle speaks !

Yet, try to realize it by this—by the tremendous price whereby your redemption has been accomplished by God, by the thought of how glorious

that act of love was which sought to save us from the world!

II.

This determination to resist evil, which we as Christians must make, was taken and adhered to by the Apostle, yet he did not take it nor carry it out in his own strength. 'We know,' he says, 'that whosoever is born of *God* sinneth not'; but this certainty rests upon a further conviction contained in the words: 'We know that we are of God.' That is the foundation of his Christian life. It is this blessed conviction which gives him the spirit of peace, which tells him that his faith is 'the victory that overcometh the world.'¹ And whence does he get this conviction? He did not receive it by means of his good resolutions; they could not give him that; he did not gain it in the school of the Baptist; there, on the contrary, he learned that he was *not* born of God, but that he needed the holy discipline of repentance before he could belong to God. No, it is here that he learned it: 'We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son, Jesus Christ.' He received this new Divine life from Christ, and from Christ he also received this blessed conviction of his salvation. In following Christ a new 'under-

¹ 1 St. John v. 4.

standing' dawned upon him, whereby he perceived the unseen world, whereby he learned to know his God as 'Him that is true,' whereby he realized that the whole world is but a shadow. Redemption in Jesus Christ is the act of grace which snatches us from the service of the evil world, and gives us the new life from God, over which sin has no more power. The coming of the Son of God (*i.e.*, His work of Redemption) has given us a new 'understanding,' whereby 'we may know Him that is true' (*i.e.*, God).

What is God to us? To accept God as the final cause of the world's creation—for this no redemption was needed. To admit the existence of a God because of the necessity of finding a satisfactory solution for the problem of the origin of thought, for this no understanding was needed other than that which is ours by nature. But that I should recognise this God as *my* God, the God with Whom I have a personal relationship, the God Who is the life of my life, Whose grace is infinitely more important to me than the whole world—this no man can do unaided. That this might be recognised by men it was needful for this God Himself to come down to us and *transform* our dim understanding. And this He did in His Son Jesus Christ. A philosopher once said: 'If there were a God, His heart would break at the sight of the misery among His creatures.' But what this doubter put as a condition *really happened*. Jeremiah uses the very expression,

‘ Mine heart within me is broken.’¹ In His Son the pitying love of the Father comes down to us, in order that we may lift up our heads and learn to recognise and know ‘ Him that is true.’ We have had occasion to remark before that St. John never speaks of our knowledge of God as a matter of the intellect only. This ‘ knowing Him that is true ’ must also be an exercise of the will, which longs to seize Him, and draw Him into our hearts and keep Him there. It is, as the Apostle immediately goes on to say, to be ‘ *in* Him that is true,’ *i.e.*, a life of fellowship with Him, a walking in the light of His countenance, so that, of its own accord, the seducing and ensnaring power of sin withdraws itself and is curbed. He that is ‘ in Him that is true ’ sinneth not.

‘ He that hath not the Son of God,’ wrote St. John earlier in this chapter, ‘ hath not life.’² Without Christ, the true, living God, with His grace and salvation, must be to us a distant, unknown, and therefore a dead God. But in Christ, in His Word and in His Person, in the part which we have in His Redemption, we realize and understand that the Father is ‘ the true God and eternal life.’ In presence of this supreme gift the world becomes nothing to us, it is a shadow, passing away and decaying; but truth and eternity are with ‘ Him that is true,’ with God. He that has God has the eternal truth. He is too powerful and great to be loved only half-heartedly.

¹ Jer. xxiii. 9.

² 1 St. John v. 12.

In the full consciousness of the greatness of this gift, which may not be received in vain, St. John expresses the last thought of his Epistle—the solemn duty of not falling back again into the bondage of the world—in the words: ‘Little children, keep yourselves from idols.’

III.

It is a significant warning, and one which has sounded through the centuries of the Church’s history. St. John looks back over the years of his long life. Alas, since the first founding of the kingdom of grace, what vicissitudes had the Church passed through, what evils had crept in, how different were the present times from those! New and dangerous growths had been constantly coming up within the Christian fold, and this father of the flock is about to leave the sheep, to leave them in a world full of evil and temptations, of hostility and false teaching. With a father’s anxiety he seeks to ward off from his children all that can harm or lure them away from the right path: ‘Little children, keep yourselves from idols.’

It may be that the Apostle, living as he was in the midst of an idolatrous people, referred, in the first instance, to the idols which he saw all around him, when he wrote: ‘Keep yourselves from idols.’ To-day the forms are different from which a new idolatry raises its head, but they are no less ensnaring and dangerous. The danger lies here;

it is not as though anybody would think of resuscitating ancient and worn-out forms of worship, but that what the Apostle would have designated idolatry is regarded as a mark of progress, expressive of the ideas of the times. Men cast away the faith of the living God, and set up a religion of their own; they refuse to acknowledge the God Who demands sanctification and holiness, and set up instead the worship of genius, the worship of all that is noble and great; they protest against a God Who works miracles and answers prayer, and in place of religion they put the progress of culture and of empire, as though it were worship to join oceans and reduce distances! What have they done? Instead of worshipping the true God, they have set up the worship of the *creature*; instead of humbly submitting themselves under the mighty hand of God, they strut forth as the champions of a vain and worldly cult which seeks in vain to hide its wretchedness under the æsthetic covering of art and poetry!

And seeing that we all live in the enervating atmosphere of this world, and feel the awful power it has of secularizing our Christianity, do we not need more than ever that Apostolic warning: 'Keep yourselves from idols.'

That which drags us into a miserable slavery—be it in the form of lust of the eyes, or lust of the flesh, or the pride of life—is *idolatry*. That which drives the living God from thy heart, and weakens thy zeal in following Christ, which seeks to sell

thy redeemed soul to the service of the world again, is in one of its many forms *idolatry*. Were we to lay bare our hearts to the rays of Divine holiness, in how many should we see enthroned, not the living God, but self and the false deities of our age! So that, unsuspected as the presence of this idolatry may be in any individual man, there is yet fearful need of the Apostle's words: 'Keep yourselves from idols.'

One more thought is suggested by these words: those who are redeemed have recognised 'Him that is true' as the only One Who is real and living. All the idols against which the Apostle warns are shams, nothingness. He who serves them is a self-deceived man. For every soul—yes, even at the present day—a time comes when the need of a God is felt, when the sorrow is too great, the thirsting soul too parched, the heart too desolate, to do without Him. How awful when man perceives that the god in whom he trusted is disappearing from his sight like mist, when he sees that this was only an idol, a make-believe, who deceived him, and had no power nor peace to offer him! How terrible, then, if the fainting soul has lost the strength to pierce through the surrounding mist, and cannot penetrate into the land of truth! Ah yes, there was every need for the Apostle to cry with a father's anxiety: 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols.'

Then, let his words come home to us. Let us watch and pray; let us seek to learn the truth

with pure and holy understanding ; let us strive to attain to eternity by earnest zeal, by a life hallowed by deeds of love ; let us keep close to the living God, Who ' is the true God and eternal life.' He is stronger than the world ; He has overcome the world for us ; He will help us to overcome it too, and by His grace we shall not only overcome it, but we shall also transform it, and prepare it for the coming of that kingdom which we pray for every day.

THE END.

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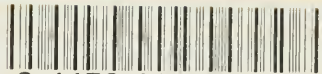
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